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# **Towards an Anthropology of Literature: the Magic of Hybrid Fictions**

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## Abstract

Anthropology and literary criticism can interact fruitfully in the investigation of theoretical, general and specific issues concerning literature. Anthropological concepts of magic and ritual are useful to account for those fictions which defy neat labels and sit at the crossroad between the fantastic and the mimetic impulses. Furthermore, the reading process of such fictions can be interpreted as a liminal experience, whereby the reader's consciousness is ritualized. Adopting a phenomenological stance and a socio-anthropological methodology, the thesis presents the author's auto-ethnography of reading, also integrating the latest findings of cognitive linguistics and psychology of fiction into the theoretical reflection. Other conceptual tools, such as ideas concerning performative language, the hero quest and epiphany, metaphor and symbolism, are elaborated in order to illustrate the reading of 'hybrid' fictions, and how the reader is actively involved in the process. Moreover, three sample novels are analysed in the light of concepts of magic from a thematic and structural point of view, as texts which posit the issue of the de-reification of the real and of the imagination itself as a critique of the discourses of modernity. Overall the thesis supports an ecological view of the (literary) imagination, conceived as a relational process whereby nature and culture are seen as co-extensive and not in opposition to each other.

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*A mia madre e a mio padre,  
che mi hanno dato la vita due volte*

## **Author's Declaration**

I confirm that the following thesis is entirely my own work.

## Introduction

Both anthropologists and literary scholars have recently investigated novels and stories as literary anthropology. In doing so, they have been pursuing different agendas. The anthropologists have tried to use fiction as an artefact of material culture that may be useful to trace the origins and developments of customs, beliefs, and socio-cultural patterns of behaviour in different historical times and places. The literary scholars have been interested in the anthropological contribution to the issue of fictionality and of why, as human beings, we need fictions. Among the former, we can mention Nigel Rapport (1994), among the latter, Wolfgang Iser (1993) is perhaps the most famous. This broad division can be traced back to different 'national traditions', with the British pursuing an anthropological reading of fictions as an ethnographic field, while the Germans have looked to broad anthropological questions regarding human 'nature'.

Both tendencies have been fruitful in that they have produced original interpretations in their respective fields. Interesting anthropological readings have been applied in particular to postcolonial fiction, which, because of its obvious ethnic content, has lent itself to such an enterprise quite easily. However, although I have spoken of 'traditions', these attempts have been far from systematic and have had a certain provisional or tentative character. The very fact that 'literary anthropology' or 'anthropology of literature' is not an institutionalized discipline, with its specific lecturing posts, but has been practiced by anthropologists and literary scholars at the juncture of their respective disciplines, bears witness to its fragmentary condition.

In this study, I intend to pursue the practice of literary anthropology both as a privileged channel/inlet into what happens to us as readers of literary fiction, and as an ethnographic enterprise, by focusing on readings of specific texts. My thesis is that we can consider literary fiction as a magical supplement to reality, and reading it as an act of 'ritualization', whose significance I shall explain in due course. What I intend to highlight now is that what Austin called the 'parasitic' nature of literary language, far from being a negative characteristic, is the very condition for understanding fiction as magical supplement. Furthermore, recent findings in cognitive linguistics confirm that everyday language and literary language are continuous and not in opposition. However, literary language is special because of the creative metaphoricity



which characterizes it. This, in turn, facilitates heightened emotions in the reader.

I suggest that there are three levels that work towards a magical effect in fiction: linguistic, structural-thematic, and technical. I am drawing on Kenneth Burke's ideas, as well as on anthropologist Tambiah's rhetorical interpretation of magic, in order to account for the first level. As to the second level, what I have called structural-thematic, I am going to show how mythical and ritual elements or 'motifs' crop up in fictional texts, while, as far as the third, technical level is concerned, I am referring to the magical 'know-how', where the distinction between natural, supernatural and secular interpretations of magic blurs and conjuring 'tricks' lend a hand to narrative composition.

The rationale behind my study is the attempt to provide a unified theory which brings together the reader and the fictional text as two elements of the same dynamic process, one necessary to the other in order to bring out fiction's potential magic. I will also be reviewing classical theoretical texts about the fantastic and magical realism, not in order to follow in their tracks but to provide a background to my alternative approach. In fact, it is my contention that literary scholars have concentrated on notions of the fantastic, the uncanny and magical realism, without interrogating the most profitable and elusive conceptual category for the advancement of critical discourse about literature, namely, 'magic'.

By reading fiction as 'magic', I also intend to 'anthropologize' Western discourses of rationality, science, religion, culture, and capitalism through the reading of specific texts, as an ethnographic 'fieldwork'. When I use this neologism in the form of a verb, I intend to point to the self-reflexive gaze that underlies my conception of literary anthropology in this study, in that an anthropological eye is turned inward in order to unveil the 'Other' inside Western culture, rather than projecting it on different cultures.

The thesis adopts a phenomenological stance in order to account for the effect of reading 'hybrid fictions' (which I illustrate later) on the reader. Phenomenology is appropriate to inquire into the structure of the reading experience as a dynamic encounter between text and reader(s). However, in this study, it is necessarily informed by the latest findings of cognitive science and linguistics, and psychology of fiction, empirical disciplines capable of answering

questions about the human cognitive make-up at the base of our thought and emotions.

In *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson reveal three fundamental findings of cognitive science: the ‘cognitive unconscious’ as the bedrock of our thought, the embodiedness of our minds, and the metaphorical character of all thought, including abstract concepts and notions of ‘reason’. If we take into account these fundamental factors and human beings’ embeddedness in their environment—both natural and cultural—it is possible to go beyond the millennia-old split between subject and object in epistemology and to found an anthropology of literature which accounts for the specifics of the reading encounter, embedded in the reader’s environment and anchored in his/her embodied existential condition. This is what I attempt here.

I elaborate some conceptual tools based on anthropological concepts of magic, myth and ritual that account for the effects of a specific kind of fiction, which I call ‘hybrid’. Accordingly, the first chapter provides a framework and a methodology, while the second explains what ‘hybrid fictions’ are: fictions which blend fantasy and mimesis in conspicuous ways and are performative in character. The third chapter considers the role of the reader of fiction as an act of ritualization, whereby s/he marks off the fictional world as special and liminal. Here the role played by ‘myth’ also finds its place. The fourth chapter introduces the notion of ‘magic’ as an alternative analytical tool for contemporary cross-genre fiction, by which I mean works that span from the realistic to the fantastic and magical realist modes. Different ‘kinds’ of ‘magic’ will be investigated and the general role of ‘magic’ in the formation of the modern mindset will also find its evaluation here. The fifth investigates the two concepts of quest and epiphany in hybrid fictions and the latter’s relation to romance. In fact I maintain that hybrid fiction reworks the quest romance in conspicuous ways. Epiphany is considered both as ‘literary’, thus pertaining to the characters, and ‘readerly’, impacting on the reader. Moreover, it concerns the author’s vision too, which is not necessarily mediated or conveyed through a character. This chapter considers the idea of ‘deformed romance’ and focuses on ‘quest and epiphany’ as two pivotal elements in fiction that do not always coincide. Thus ideas on the ‘quest of the hero’ by Campbell and also the spiritual aspect of the quest as interpreted by Jung and Eliade will be taken into account here. The sixth chapter dwells on the role of emotions in reading and is

composed of my auto-ethnography of reading, where I adopt a socio-anthropological method in order to access the novels selected for later analysis. Then, the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters elaborate on some of the findings of cognitive linguistics. The seventh chapter deals with 'history, magic and flux', closely interweaving a narrative idea of history with the insights of magical thought and the ethos of process philosophy. It shows how the chosen novels are permeated by magical and alchemical ideas both thematically and structurally. It is the focus of this chapter to show how these novels expose the reification tendency at work inside modern and (post)industrial Western cultures and point to alternative approaches for de-essentializing cultural discourse.

I have chosen three contemporary novels by authors who did not influence or acknowledge each other. They belong to different generations and have different concerns and worldviews, yet they all show different stages of what we could call the cultural 'genealogy' of the West. They are the Scottish Alasdair Gray, the Austro-German Daniel Kehlmann and the Italian Anna Maria Ortese. The three writers belong to different generations; Alasdair Gray was born in 1934, Daniel Kehlmann in 1975 and Anna Maria Ortese in 1914 (she died in 1998). In reading their novels, I show how 'magic' is a fruitful and flexible analytical tool and also how it confronts dialectically the logic of rationalism and capitalism.

The thesis ends with a concluding statement on its interpretive effort, where its diverse facets are brought together. Two are the objectives of my work: to inquire into the reading of 'hybrid fictions' and its characteristics, and to show how they can be subversive and critical in the reading process. My overall aim is to set up an anthropology of literature as an alternative methodology for studying literature. I have applied this methodology to the specific issue of 'hybrid fiction' in order to provide an example of a holistic mode of literary interpretation.

# 1 Framework for an Anthropology of Literature

## 1.1 Why Literature and Anthropology

How can anthropology and literature interact in scholarly research and literary criticism? And why is it worth attempting to set up a space for their interaction? This study deals with these and related questions. It also pushes the boundaries even further to show, in the end, that the literary critic can be an ethnographer, if s/he recognizes what van Oort considers as the paradox of being human: ‘Only humans have evolved the paradoxical ability to represent their own origin,’<sup>1</sup> through ritual first and then through art and literature. Let us start by defining literature.

Literature is that form of art that uses language as its medium. As a form of art, it is not useful in a directly practical sense, yet it has undoubted aesthetic, psychological and social functions that have been discussed ever since the time of Plato. R. G. Collingwood in his *The Principles of Art* (1938) exposes the common misunderstanding of Plato and Aristotle’s views on art.<sup>2</sup> ‘The doctrine that all art is representative is a doctrine commonly attributed to Plato and Aristotle; and something like it was actually held by theorists of the Renaissance and the seventeenth century’ (43). By quoting Plato at some length, he shows how his banishment of the poet from the city was intended only for a certain kind of poet, namely ‘the entertainer who [...] represents trivial or disgusting things’ (47), and later extended to the whole of ‘representative poetry’ (48): ‘the accused is never poetry, but “poetry for pleasure’s sake, i.e. representation”’ (49). In fact, Plato illustrated his philosophical points with astounding poetical fables, such as the fable of the cave. Collingwood explains how, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle defended that very representative poetry, produced merely for pleasure, a poetry that was superseding ‘the old magico-religious art’ (52) dear to Plato. In spite of many exceptions, the concept that art is mere mimetic representation, which took hold with the Renaissance’s readings of the classics, held sway in Western culture till the Romantics reacted to these views, upholding Shakespeare’s irregular plays as the mark of genius. In

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<sup>1</sup> Richard van Oort, ‘The Critic as Ethnographer’, *New Literary History*, 35; 4 (Autumn 2004), pp. 621-61.

<sup>2</sup> Robin G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938).

the twentieth century, experimentalists such as Bertolt Brecht practiced an estranging form of art that would counteract the identification and cathartic effect theorized by Aristotle. In Brecht's opinion art has a revolutionary function: it should make the audience uncomfortable and thus facilitate the awakening of their consciousness. Yet, in spite of conspicuous examples, such as the Romantics, the Experimentalists, or the avant-garde of the early twentieth century, the idea of art as mirror of reality has continued to be the centrepiece of Western aesthetic debates, as the great realist novels of the nineteenth century and the Neo-realist poetics in the 1950s testify.

The preponderance of sight underpinning traditional Western aesthetic thought, the privileging of the gaze over the 'lower' senses as the medium of knowledge has been elaborated in modern times by Kant in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) and in the twentieth century by Rudolf Arnheim in *Visual Thinking* (1972). The pervasiveness of the gaze and its geometrical grasping of phenomena is at work in the Structuralists, for example, who adhere to a spatial visual metaphor when they state that literature is all about surface and deep relationships between words. They stick to binary oppositions in order to define the functions of language and art. Poststructuralists on the other hand, have exposed symbolism as ideologically charged and have deconstructed entrenched intellectual claims and naturalized prejudices. Their foremost thinker, Jacques Derrida, elaborated his own mystique of language, which, of course, has a paradoxically religious element to it, going back to the kabbalistic idea of a language made up of sacred signs (which are characteristically visual).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed this mystical element is an undercurrent that has flowed into several religious and artistic movements in Western history. Collingwood points out both the similarities and the differences between magic and art, and recognizes the existence of a kind of magical art, like that produced by prehistoric 'cave men, the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks and medieval Europeans' (77). While I agree with Collingwood that 'magic consists essentially in a system of practices, a technique' (63), I find that his theory underplays the aesthetic significance of magic when he states:

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough treatment of the convergence of Derrida's thought and Jewish mysticism and the latter's influence on the former, see Gideon Onfrat, *The Jewish Derrida* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001); Eric R. Wolfson, 'Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 70.3 (September 2002), 475-514; Sanford L. Drob, 'Jacques Derrida and the Kabbalah' (2006), [www.newkabbalah.com](http://www.newkabbalah.com), [accessed 20 July 2012].

Magic is a representation where the emotion evoked is an emotion valued on account of its function in practical life, evoked in order that it may discharge that function, and fed by the generative or focusing magical activity into the practical life that needs it. Magical activity is a kind of dynamo supplying the mechanism of practical life with the emotional current that drives it. Hence magic is a necessity for every sort and condition of man, and is actually found in every healthy society. (68 - 9)

Collingwood is not referring to crass superstition, obviously, but to an organic worldview that makes sense of life and generates 'morale' (67) for the members of a certain society. Certainly magic has this function too, but it is not limited to these utilitarian aspects. It is not so obvious in fact that magic works only to evoke specific emotions, given their ineradicable subjectivity. Magic has to do with heightened perception and imagination too, with a shifting of boundaries, and in this sense it is also a mode of consciousness, as it will be seen later.

The idea that there is a magical-religious component to art has been enthusiastically upheld by the Romantics and their admirers ever since. Before Rationalism came to the fore, there was no concept of a split between the sensuous and the spiritual dimensions, which, in fact, coexisted and interacted in the art of poetry.<sup>4</sup> The case of alchemy is illustrative of the coexistence of the sensuous and the mystical. This coexistence is an important characteristic of verbal magic. Alchemy, which was both a practical discipline in a home-made laboratory, and a spiritual practice, was an example of this sensuous logic, or thinking by images. H. Stanley Groves in his *Alchemy, Ancient and Modern*--first published in 1912--explains:<sup>5</sup>

[...] although there cannot be the slightest doubt that the great majority of alchemists were engaged in problems and experiments of a physical nature, yet there were a few men included within the alchemistic ranks who were entirely, or almost entirely, concerned with problems of a spiritual nature; Thomas Vaughan, for example, and Jacob Boehme, who boldly employed the language of Alchemy in the elaboration of his system of mystical philosophy. [...] In modern times there has come about a divorce between Religion and Science in men's minds (though more recently a unifying tendency has set in); but it was otherwise with the alchemists, their religion and their science were closely united. We have said that 'Alchemy was the

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<sup>4</sup> See for example T. S. Eliot's essay on 'The metaphysical poets', *The Times Literary Supplement* (20 October 1921). [Eliot was vehemently anti-Romantic. In this essay he refers to an older – classical, medieval, and Renaissance sense of wholeness.]

<sup>5</sup> <forgottenbooks.com>: [accessed 22 September 2010].

attempt to demonstrate experimentally on the material plane the validity of a certain philosophical view of the Cosmos'; now, this 'philosophical view of the Cosmos' was Mysticism. **Alchemy had its origin in the attempt to apply, in a certain manner, the principles of Mysticism to the things of the physical plane**, and was, therefore, of a dual nature, on the one hand spiritual and religious, on the other physical and material. (7 - 8, emphasis in the original)

The famous axiom beloved by every alchemist – *'What is above is as that which is below, and what is below is as that which is above'* – although of questionable origin, tersely expresses the basic idea of Alchemy. The alchemists postulated and believed in a very real sense in the essential unity of the Cosmos. Hence, they held that there is a correspondence or analogy existing between things spiritual and things physical, the same laws operating in each realm. (10, emphasis in the original)

Subsequently, the Enlightenment would confine alchemy and other magical-religious practices to the realm of superstition or playfulness. Yet, as it will be shown at a later stage, there have been illustrious examples drawing on the 'logic' of magic in art. This is important to bear in mind, in order to foreground the ideological import of the official function of art as portraying life and the human condition in general.

On the other hand, literature that has refused to portray life has often been tainted with the accusation of escapism or seen as 'mere' entertainment. Yet, visionary and subversive art tells quite another story. In fact it engages the reader in an active way, by appealing to his imagination and capacity to envisage things, rather than relying on plausibility and belief only.

The opposition between imagination and belief is a more or less concealed key issue that has shaped Western historical consciousness since Descartes. For the Rationalists, belief became a matter of exclusive intellectual plausibility, and imagination became just an inferior and vague faculty for which they had not much use.

Although sceptical about imagination as a way to knowledge, the great Scottish philosopher David Hume assigned to it a threefold role. In Mary Warnock's exegesis of *The Treatise on Human Understanding*:

[...] in the first place, he regarded imagination as the reproductive faculty by which we are enabled to recreate in ourselves, in the form of ideas, experiences we have once had immediately, through impressions. [...] It is worth remarking that Hume here makes no

distinction between imagination and memory. It is the function of imagination, he says, to enable us to relive the past. [...]

Hume gave imagination a second role which introduced that idea of freedom invoked by poets such as Sidney, when they think of the creativity of the imagination. Imagination enables us to bring together a number of different impressions we have had in the past, in order to make up general, even abstract, ideas. [...]

A third and crucial role of the imagination in Hume's theory is that which it exercises when objects of sense are actually before us. [...] Imagination is said by Hume to perform the feat of making us believe that the world is peopled by continuous and independent objects by filling in the gaps in our actual experience. [...] And yet he retained the commonly held view that the imagination is a pretty poor thing, certainly not fit to be relied on for such a momentous responsibility as that of furnishing the world with those solid separate objects which we all assume are its proper furniture.<sup>6</sup>

When in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) Samuel Coleridge wrote about 'the willing suspension of disbelief' (Chapter 14, CCII.6), he was trying to bridge the opposition between imagination and belief once again. As Mary Warnock puts it, in his famous statement on the nature of the imagination:

Coleridge divides imagination itself into the primary and the secondary. Primary imagination is that which we deploy in all perception, by which in some inexplicable manner we create the real world, with which we are familiar. Without it the world of sense would be unintelligible and indeed uninhabitable. Primary imagination thus corresponds to the imagination in Hume's epistemology, about which he somewhat tentatively speaks of necessary principles. More directly, it is derived from Kant's a priori imagination, that capacity which, apart from any actual experience, provides the means by which our concepts can apply to the world that is given us in experience. It is common to all of us; one person is not, in this sense of 'imagination', more imaginative than another.

Secondary imagination is, Coleridge says, 'an echo' of primary. It, unlike the primary, 'coexists with the conscious will'. 'It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate.' It is the imagination at work in great works of art. We are taken back, here, to Kant's genius, who strives, never with total success, for the expression of Aesthetic Ideas. Such imagination is essentially creative and vital. [...]

In *Biographia Literaria* (vol. 2, ch. XIV, p. 11) Coleridge makes it plain that secondary imagination is not less inexplicable than primary. He refers to it as 'that synthetic and magical power'. For, though primary and secondary imagination can be distinguished, yet they operate in fundamentally the same way, the one 'making' the world in which we normally lead our lives, the other 'making' new worlds. Fancy, on the other hand is, according to Coleridge, 'no other than a

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Warnock, *Imagination and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, repr. 1996), pp. 6-10.



form of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word CHOICE.’ (1996: 41-2)

As all Romantics and Post-romantics ever since, Coleridge probed the dynamics of the human psyche and made it the subject of his art. Because the Romantics shifted the centre of art to the regenerating potential of the human mind and heart, their literature was revolutionary and visionary, and is particularly suitable to be considered a form of magic. Magic has been a much debated anthropological concept since the inception of anthropology itself. Therefore the anthropology of magic is especially relevant to our study of the literature of magic.

Although Herodotus is regarded as the mythical founder of anthropological discourse, anthropology, ‘study of man’, has its more recent predecessors in many travel accounts that European explorers, missionaries and merchants produced as a result of their contacts with extra-European cultures, starting from Marco Polo down to the many explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the works of the French Encyclopedists, in Voltaire’s, Rousseau’s and Montesquieu’s philosophical reflections about ‘the noble savage’ and ‘the state of nature’, in Romantic exoticism (even if in German Romanticism the very word anthropology had the literal meaning of ‘the study of man’, which also involved theory about ‘human nature’ and ethics) and in the colonial enterprise of the Victorian era. However, not all anthropologists were interested in the anthropological discussion of an abstract human nature: in fact, the first anthropologists engaged with the colonized people in order to serve the imperial urge to classify. Missionaries and explorers engaged in the study of ethnic customs and later a generation of professional anthropologists came into being, first relying on the missionaries and explorers’ accounts, later engaging in first-hand ethnographic research, or ‘fieldwork’. Ethnography is the writing of empirical case studies based on the practice of ‘participant observation’ in the ‘field’. Anthropology is the study of human cultures and includes both ethnography and theoretical frameworks and concepts of interpretation.

Anthropology as the ‘scientific’ study of man was put on sure ground at the beginning of the twentieth century by Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, Maria Czaplicka and Bronislaw Malinowski, who claimed to have been the first to practice fieldwork and to establish ethnographic classical practice as an

anthropological method. In his view, the ethnographer's task is 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world.'<sup>7</sup>

Traditionally, generations of Western anthropologists went out to the colonies to 'study' the colonized people, their customs and institutions, believing in their own scientific mission, objectivity, intellectual neutrality and detachment. Moreover, not all anthropologists were complicit with colonialism. For example, in the USA the anthropological school founded by Franz Boas, not only produced excellent ethnographies, but also advocated a cultural relativism that allowed him to understand Native American cultures on their own terms and to take a stand against the federal legislation impinging on the rights of the Native American people. Thus, anthropologists such as Alfred Kroeber, his wife Theodora Kroeber, and Oliver La Farge worked actively to defend the rights of the Native Americans, the latter also serving as president of the National Association on Indian Affairs (1933-37) and as president of the Association on American Indian Affairs (1937-42, 1946-63).

After the emancipation of the colonies, postcolonial intellectuals and a new generation of anthropologists, often coming from these very colonies, questioned and debunked Western premises and prejudices. The neutrality of the traditional ethnographic method of 'participant observation' has been exposed as an impossibility, and many contemporary anthropologists have addressed this epistemological and methodological issue by involving the people they worked with in their own anthropological accounts, as co-authors or acknowledged sources.<sup>8</sup> This can be defined as the 'literary turn' of anthropology: anthropology as literature, inasmuch as the authorial role in the crafting of a text is foregrounded. In spite of this important change, however, it is still to be determined whether anthropology can overcome its colonialist origins and past fully. But the fact remains that anthropological accounts at their best aspire to literary status. What does this mean?

It can be stated safely that anthropology offers a paradigm of representation, rather than a 'truthful' portrayal of native customs. And representation is not necessarily mimesis, as Iser pointed out in his seminal book

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<sup>7</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: an Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelago* (1922; repr. London: Routledge, 1961), p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Vincent Crapanzano, *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

*The Fictional and the Imaginary* (1993).<sup>9</sup> In fact, representation can be performative and expressive, rather than aiming at a specular image of ‘reality’. Also, as Kenneth Burke said, a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing (1935: 70), and what is left out is determined by what is looked for.<sup>10</sup> What one looks for depends on the intellectual, cultural and social premises of the whole anthropological project at hand and the particular characteristics (both socio-cultural and psychological) of the individual anthropologist. In other words, by representing other people’s cultures, anthropologists reveal a lot about the unstated side of their own cultures. Many anthropologists who have realized this have turned to the study of their own cultures and societies. It is certainly worth attempting to anthropologize the West through a self-reflexive practice of cultural observation, as we increasingly recognize our projections on the ‘Other’ as ghosts and revenants of our own ‘home’. Let us, then, take back these projections and work on them from the ‘inside’, from what I call ‘the inner frontier of colonialism’. In fact as Western history demonstrates, the extra-European colonial enterprise would have not been possible without the on-going marginalization of deviant ideas and practices ‘at home’. For example, both peasants in remote areas of the European countries and ‘primitives’ in the colonies were often considered as the last remnants of a previous, backward stage of evolution and were stigmatized and assimilated for their ‘superstition’. At the same time, as the works of Michel Foucault have demonstrated, the rise of bio-power and its means of control of the masses, and of dissidents, has ensured compliance, eradication, or pathologization of difference. Rationalism and scientism have been such powerful discursive constructs in the violent handling of marginal groups, their worldviews and activities that their genealogy and development are worthy subjects of study even in literary criticism. Or rather, literary criticism can be an elective *locus* of historical and philosophical insights.

Literary texts are privileged repositories of data for this task and that is why an anthropology of literature can be established and practiced. Although anthropological ideas have often been used to make sense of ethnic customs and rituals in postcolonial literary texts, few attempts have been made to study literature as an anthropological ‘field’. Fewer still are the studies of Western

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<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictional and the Imaginary* (Baltimore, Md; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (New York: New Republic, 1935).

literary texts from this point of view.<sup>11</sup> As far as I am aware, nobody has tried to anthropologize Western culture(s) through the study of its (their) literature(s). This is what I do here. I support the idea and practice of an anthropology of literature, but I do not impose ideas from anthropology and literary criticism on each other in an external way. Rather, I allow for a space of fruitful interaction and interplay between the two disciplines. In this sense, I take on board the ethnographic way of seeing and consider literature as a 'field' for an anthropologically informed literary criticism, within the wider context of an anthropology of literature, whereby I aim at providing 'readings' of literary texts that are potentially new.

A few words on the notion of 'field' are necessary. In fact I use this word in a broader sense than is usually implied in anthropology, where it is modelled on the research method of data collection. The way I use the word 'field' resonates with the notion in the physical and biological sciences, as employed by Rupert Sheldrake (1994).<sup>12</sup> In other words, I see literature as a 'field', an interconnected whole made up of several interlocked and recursive patterns, both as information and form, as it will be explained later; literature as a 'site' where you can pick up different (subterranean) threads of thought and also see their interaction in the shaping of what Castoriadis calls the 'social-historical' dimension.<sup>13</sup>

What is an anthropology of literature good for? To be aware of the lenses we have used to look at the 'Other', and what these reveal us about ourselves, our own cultures and self-perceptions. In this sense, I advocate a phenomenological approach to the study of literature, the personal, cultural and historical dimensions of one's experience being the condition *sine qua non* for literary research and analysis. In the process of reading Western literature in this way, we may be in for some surprises about the stakes of the so called 'project of modernity' and discover that it is a well thought-out construct, nonetheless ridden with ambiguities, contradictions and unacknowledged hybridization practices. In order to be able to do this kind of reading, we need to adopt

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<sup>11</sup> See Richard Handler and Daniel A. Segal, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture. An Essay on the Narration of Social Realities* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), and Nigel Rapport, *The Prose and the Passion: Anthropology, Literature, and the Writing of E. M. Forster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: the Greening of Science and God* (1991; Rochester, Vt: Park Street Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Paris, 1975; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 167.

simultaneously what anthropologists call etic and emic perspectives, being at once ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’, able to see how our cultural history has been shaped by a set of specific presuppositions, going back to ancient Jewish and Greek classical thought, as some anthropologists have forcefully demonstrated in their studies.<sup>14</sup>

## 1.2 Why Magic

It becomes evident when we try to understand the presuppositions that have moulded Western culture and thought as we know it today that ‘magic’ is a fundamental concept, which, since the Enlightenment, has been used as a ‘foil’ in shaping Western self-images. For this reason it is useful to be aware of the origins and history of magic as an anthropological concept.

What we call ‘magic’ is as old as humanity itself. However, as a conceptual category, it is extremely unstable and vague, at least in the way it was laid out by British and French anthropologists and sociologists in the second part of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Here I look at the various formulations and evaluate them, pointing out their limits. It is worth bearing in mind that before the Enlightenment branded magic as ‘superstition’, there was a widespread magical and mystical consciousness in Europe, even among the educated classes. A conspicuous example is Sir Isaac Newton, the father of modern science and a convinced alchemist too. Ronald Hutton, in his *The Triumph of the Moon* (1999), sets out to distinguish ‘high magic’ as part of the Renaissance intellectual tradition, and ‘low magic’ as a set of folk beliefs and practices.<sup>15</sup> However, ‘magic’ and ‘rationality’ as mutually exclusive are products of Enlightenment discourse and later of Positivism. I refer to ‘magic’ and ‘rationality’ in inverted commas because they are concepts which were constructed in the way we are familiar with today in that age. The former has been the foil which has enabled ‘Western rationality’ to constitute itself. In this sense, the two concepts are interdependent.

The first to develop the concept of ‘magic’ in anthropology was Edward Tylor. He saw ‘magic’ as a pseudoscience, a mistaken attempt to find solutions

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<sup>14</sup> See Tambiah J. Stanley (1990) and Annette B. Weiner (1983) on the distinction between religion and idolatry, as deriving from the Jewish-Greek cultural heritage.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: a History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

to problems and mastery over natural laws. Sir James Frazer took this view on board and refined it further. 'Magic' was to be considered as the first and most primitive stage of 'unenlightened' and 'pre-rational' thinking, to be supplanted by religion at a higher stage of intellectual development and, finally, by science, which was the apotheosis of the entire human intellectual rise. This stage, of course, was reached by Victorian evolutionist scientists and anthropologists themselves. In other words, 'magic' was just 'fallacious science'.

At the same time in France, the school going back to Emile Durkheim, and then continued by Marcel Mauss, developed a strong distinction between 'magic' on one hand and 'religion' on the other. The latter was considered as eminently social in its structures, institutions, dogmas and beliefs and was seen as essentially cohesive in function. 'Magic,' instead, was the domain of the individual, the antisocial desire of a marginalized or somewhat socially and psychologically frustrated sorcerer. Both these traditions of thought considered 'magic' in the light of, or in opposition to something else. 'Magic' was the domain of the irrational and antisocial, and as such it was to be frowned upon. In fact, Tylor marvelled at the extent of the survival of 'superstition' in the beliefs of the uneducated classes even in the progressive Europe of his days.

Before Edward Evans-Pritchard published his masterpiece on Zande witchcraft *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), an overlooked letter exchange between French philosopher Lévy-Bruhl and the younger British anthropologist put forward the much contested idea that 'primitive' people do in fact think in a completely different way, which is not irrational but a-rational, or rather founded on a completely different logic from the rational one. Lévy-Bruhl called this different way of thinking *participation mystique*. Evans Pritchard, who admired him greatly, thought nonetheless that it would be necessary to refine the terms used to describe this mentality, as it was not something confined to 'primitive' thinking, but was a mode of thought available to everyone behind the surface of rationality. In fact, he argued, they coexisted in 'modern' man too. Evans Pritchard was interested not so much in comparing 'primitive mentality' to rationality; rather he thought it would be fruitful and insightful to compare *participation mystique* among primitive societies and modern ones. The official account of Lévy-Bruhl's intellectual development emphasizes his later perplexity and rejection of his previous ideas about *participation mystique*. However, as Susan Greenwood (2009) has

convincingly argued in her *The Anthropology of Magic*, this was not the case.<sup>16</sup> The letters and the notebooks in fact prove the contrary, namely that Lévy-Bruhl went on thinking about his concept of *participation mystique* and refined it further throughout his life. This fact is important in order to understand magic as *a specific kind of mental and emotional state*.

Another anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski advanced an alternative theory about ‘magic’. He had an emotionalist view of ‘magic’ as arising in stressful situations, when technical methods are ineffective and cannot achieve desired results. Magic can release such stress in rituals that imitate and advance the desired results.<sup>17</sup> Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, on the other hand, rejected Malinowski’s views of magic psychological function and endorsed a Durkheimian perspective, in that he stated that magic has to do with social structures, whose internal characteristics magic articulates. However, he argued against the Durkheimian dichotomy between ‘magic’ and ‘religion’, because he saw them both as pertaining to the wider field of ‘ritual’.<sup>18</sup>

Later, the father of structuralism, Lévi-Strauss, considered ‘primitive mentality’ as not at all mystical, but rather profoundly rational and logical. He did this by analysing a great number of myths from Amazonia and showed how these myths expressed sets of binary oppositions that, once seen and conceptualized, were a link in an unbroken chain of relationships whereby their whole worldview and mode of life hung together and could be made sense of with a little ‘translation’ practice.

These are some of the most famous theories of ‘magic’ in British and French anthropology and sociology. They stressed different elements, but they all tended to analyse magic in the light of something else or to make sense of it by superimposing the Western mind-set on the observed phenomena. The only exception was Lévy-Bruhl’s *participation mystique* which, in spite of a certain black and white opposition between ‘primitive’ and ‘modern’, ‘mystical’ and ‘rational’, allowed for the possibility that an a-rational mode of thought might exist.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Susan Greenwood, *The Anthropology of Magic* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2009), especially pp. 25-6.

<sup>17</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (London: Souvenir Press, 1982)

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, ‘Religion and Society’, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 75, No. 1-2 (1945), pp. 33-43.

<sup>19</sup> (in spite of Collingwood’s mistaken conflation of Lévy-Bruhl with those who maintain that magic is ‘neurosis’, in *The Principles of Art*, 1938, pp. 62-5).

Apart from Lévy-Bruhl, other anthropologists have provided symbolic approaches to the interpretation of 'magic'. Arnold Van Gennep in *Rites of Passage* (1908) laid the groundwork for future theories of ritual.<sup>20</sup> He argued for the co-existence of 'magic' and 'religion', the latter being a theoretical addition to a set of techniques that constitute 'magic'. Particularly famous among anthropologists is his division of ritual in three stages or categories: 'separation, transition and incorporation'. Of these, the second is deemed to be endowed with a specific regenerative and transformational power, especially in the 'rites of passage' (for example from childhood to adulthood). This condition is called 'liminality' and has been elaborated further by anthropologist Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1969), as being characterised by 'egalitarianism' and the spirit of 'communitas', that is anti-hierarchical and anti-structural, when compared to the social order.<sup>21</sup> Mary Douglas, the author of *Purity and Danger* (1966) and *Natural Symbols* (1970), argues against the rigid separation of 'religion' and 'magic', because both are symbols of social structure and entail similar ideas of contagion.<sup>22</sup> Instead, she suggests a distinction between 'high ritualism' and 'low ritualism': an example of the latter is Protestantism, while Catholicism is characterised by a high degree of 'ritualism', which is the emphasis placed on the right succession and manipulation of symbols and words. Clifford Geertz in his *The Interpretation of Cultures*, published in 1966, states that there are three factors an anthropologist has to take into account when observing human behaviour: the psychological, the cultural beliefs and ideas, and the social order. Accordingly he defines religion as:

(1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>23</sup>

From this multi-layered definition of religion, Geertz goes on to argue for the power of ritual to change a man and his outlook on the world.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Manika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University Press, 1960), first publ. in 1908.

<sup>21</sup> Victor Witter Turner, *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 2001), first publ. in 1966. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: Routledge, 1996), first publ. in 1970.

<sup>23</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1966; repr. New York: Basic Books, 1973; repr. 2000), 87-125 (p. 90).



In the 1980s and 1990s, the highly original anthropologist Alfred Gell focused on the way language and objects are used in magical activities, thereby coming to the conclusion that magic is a kind of ‘technology’, which makes use of words and artefacts and applies cognitive strategies in order to achieve its purposes. In his view, no essential feature distinguishes ‘magical’ from ‘technical’ activities, which are often found together:

I take the view that ‘magic’ as an adjunct to technical procedures persists because it serves ‘symbolic’ ends, that is to say, cognitive ones. Magical thought formalizes and codifies the structural features of technical activity, imposing on it a framework of organization which regulates each successive stage in a complex process. [...] Magic consists of a symbolic ‘commentary’ on technical strategies in [economic] production, [sexual] reproduction and psychological manipulation. I suggest that magic derives from play. When children play, they provide a continuous stream of commentary on their own behaviour. This commentary frames their actions, divides it up into segments, defines momentary goals, and so on. It seems that this superimposed organizational format both guides imaginative play as it proceeds, and also provides a means of internalizing it and recalling it, as well as raw materials for subsequent exercises in innovation and recombination, using previously accumulated materials in new configurations.<sup>24</sup>

While on one hand, it is fruitful to de-emphasize the difference between ‘magical’ and ‘technical’, on the other this is not sufficient to distinguish the specificity of so-called magical activities: Gell referred to cognitive strategies, but he did not take into account the emotions of the agent who performs magic and of the audience. It is true that he considered magic as a psychological weapon capable of influencing the recipient and forcing him into compliance, but other than that, he did not elaborate on positive or subversive aspects of the emotional involvement of both agent and recipient.<sup>25</sup> On the contrary, in considering the close relation between magic and art, he saw the latter as invariably promoting acquiescence and defending the status quo—a rather reductive view of art, and of magic.

Stanley Jerayah Tambiah’s views on magic and ritual are particularly important for the development of an anthropology of literature. In fact he defines ‘magic’ as a ‘rhetorical art’ and also incorporates many of the themes developed by his predecessors. He states that:

<sup>24</sup> Alfred Gell, ‘Technology and Magic’, in *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 4, Issue 2 (Apr., 1988), 6-9 (pp. 7-8).

<sup>25</sup> Alfred Gell, ‘The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology’, in J. Coote and A. Shelton (eds.), *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), pp. 40-63.

Magical acts are ritual acts, and ritual acts are performative acts whose positive and creative meaning is missed and whose persuasive validity is misjudged if they are subjected to that kind of empirical verification associated with scientific activity.<sup>26</sup>

A performative act is an act that by being enacted only effects a change of state, while 'magic' involves both object manipulation and words (spells or incantations). For Tambiah, 'magic' can be analysed both from the point of view of its end, and within its semantic frame. He reworks Frazer's distinction between homeopathic and contagious magic, adding an analogy with metaphor and metonymy, respectively. In fact, homeopathic magic and metaphor both rely on similarities, while contagious magic and metonymy depend on the displacing of a quality from an object to another which is perceived as contiguous. These and many more interesting reflections are contained in his collection of essays *Culture, Thought and Social Action* (1985). In a later chapter some of his arguments will be analysed and related to fiction in detail. While Tambiah distinguishes between the 'causal' and the 'participatory', he believes that they are not so much innate cognitive modes of thought as socially constructed ways of seeing the world. However, he leaves open the question of how the passage from one to the other occurs. In his *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (1990), Tambiah analyses the way the early distinctions between 'magic' and 'religion' were laid out.<sup>27</sup> He suggests that the legacy of Judaism that opposed true religion to idolatry coloured the early anthropologists' reflections and formulations. The other element that shaped their definitions was the Protestant condemnation of magic as inefficacious and as a futile attempt to coerce God into a specific course of action. Obviously, the Protestant propagandists of the beginning of the seventeenth century had in mind Catholicism as an example of 'magic'. His genealogy, then, tracks the origins of a fundamental Western intellectual distinction back to culture-specific legacies.

This overview of some of the major theories of 'magic', 'religion' and 'ritual' is selective and lays no claim to completeness. Its purpose in this context is to show the importance of the reflection on 'magic' for the contribution that

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<sup>26</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, 'Form and Meaning of Magical Acts', in *Culture, Thought and Social Action: an Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

it can give to an understanding of specific features of Western intellectual history, characterized by a strong push towards abstraction and dichotomous thought. Furthermore, the term 'magic' is fruitful to illuminate some fundamental aspects of reading fiction, as will be shown at a later stage.

No matter how different these approaches to 'magic' are, all recent scholars agree on the paramount importance of 'magic' to define groups and individual identities. In fact, they highlight how 'magic' is a somewhat shadowy notion, which, however, has helped (mostly) Westerners to shape their perceptions and definitions of themselves and of others; better still, to define themselves in opposition to the 'Other'. In fact Westerners elaborated the theoretical construct of 'magic' because it served the pragmatic purpose of distinguishing the 'civilized man' from the 'others', and therefore, it was instrumental to the construction of the official images of 'modernity' and 'progress'.

Accordingly, in *Making Magic* (2004), Randall Styers tracks the 'emergence of magic in the modern world':<sup>28</sup>

My basic argument in this text is that debates concerning magic have maintained a great appeal for social theorists in large measure because they provide such a rich site for articulating and contesting the nature and boundaries of modernity. (21)

He sets out to answer the following questions:

How has magic functioned in modern thought to demarcate the limits of religion? How have constructions of magic served to give definition to science and scientific rationality? Finally, with magic positioned as a buffer between religion and science, what social and political norms have been promoted through these theories? (22)

One of the primary functions of magic in [...] scholarly literature has been to serve as a foil to religion. [...] Magic has been configured as the illegitimate (and effeminized) sibling, and through contrast with this form of deviance, scholars have sought to give religion clearer definition. [...] Magic not only has offered a foil for religion but also has been positioned in the scholarly tradition as occupying some sort of middle ground between religion and that other great Western formation, 'science'. [...] And with magic positioned as a middle ground between religion and science, it has functioned in the

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<sup>28</sup> Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, And Science In The Modern World* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

scholarly literature to mediate—even police—relations between the two. Throughout the history of modern Western social science and religious studies, numerous scholars have struggled to reify magic as a discrete entity and to map the precise relations among magic, religion, and science. (6-7)

While it is not possible to follow Styers' passionate and insightful study in detail, I would like to stress the similarity of intent underlying my project. In fact, what Styers does for anthropology, I would like to do for literary criticism. However, the attempt at 'anthropologizing the West' by focusing on the category of 'magic' in my case is renewed with a few additional characteristics. First and foremost, this attempt passes through a redefinition of what I see as the 'magic' of fiction reading: beyond the specific positions assumed by different scholars, I view 'magic' as both a way of thinking *and* acting, bridging the eminently Western opposition between theory and praxis. I venture out in new territory, building up a new methodology for an anthropology of literature, and then reading three literary texts accordingly. Secondly, by embracing an alternative definition of 'magic' as both a universal mode of consciousness and a technology in the form of a 'rhetorical art' (more on this later), I also focus on the problem of 'modernity' in the selected novels, in order to show the deconstructive tendencies at work in some Western contemporary literature. Thus my intent has a double perspective: I link up a theory of reading as 'magic' to a focus on 'modernity' as the issue dealt with in the chosen novels and confronted by the readers themselves. The novels analysed are very different from each other and show varying degrees of mimesis and fantasy. They are: *Lanark* (1981) by Alasdair Gray, *The Iguana* (*L'Iguana*, 1965) by Anna Maria Ortese and *Measuring the World* (*Die Vermessung der Welt*, 2005) by Daniel Kehlmann. In spite of their diversity, these texts engage in their own ways with the concept of 'modernity' in its various stages and meanings within their cultural frames of reference, respectively industrial and post-industrial urban Scotland, Italy and the post-colonial world (albeit in a fantastic key) in the 1960s, and Germany at the intersection of Enlightenment and Romanticism. Indeed, the dialectics between Enlightenment and Romanticism are a key element for the comprehension of the origins of 'modernity' as an intellectual category.

In his literary study on *The Romantic Fantastic* (1984), the comparatist Tobin Siebers tries to account for the nineteenth century fantastic tale through

what he calls the ‘logic of superstition’, defending an anthropological interpretation whereby the Romantic exaltation of superstition against the Enlightenment’s ‘intolerance and rationalist fanaticism’ towards deviance and marginality produced the fantastic tale with its own specific characteristics, as a reaction.<sup>29</sup> Siebers’ approach to literature is based on the premises of the sociological view of a ‘disenchanted’ world, first pioneered by Max Weber in ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’ (1919).<sup>30</sup>

According to this point of view, rationalism, capitalism and modernization brought about ‘disenchantment’: by ‘taking away the magic’ from daily life and reducing mystery, and, at the same time, constantly enlarging science’s compass for rational knowledge and explanation. While no one would deny the evidence for this stance, it is still necessary to allow for a flexible and non-monolithic approach to the phenomenon of ‘modernity’ and ‘rationalism’. In fact, the Enlightenment Age produced such playfully serious masterpieces as Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, *The Magic Flute* (1791), which contains many Masonic symbols, and Goldoni’s playful drama *Il mondo della luna*, *The Moon World* (1777), set to music by Joseph Haydn. Furthermore, as a recent project directed by Dan Edelstein at the University of Stanford has shown, there was a ‘dark side’ to the Enlightenment, an age of proliferation of secret societies with their own complex rituals and reconstructionist tendencies.<sup>31</sup>

I consider literature as a nodal centre for dealing with the issue of the fantastic in a creative way, through the dynamics of the reading process, that is, the interaction between text and reader, which, through both the symbolic mode of myth and the discursive mode of logos, provides an enhanced (magical) supplement to consensus reality and, in the best of cases, facilitates a shift in the reader’s consciousness.

In subsequent chapters, some ideas concerning ‘myth’ and ‘ritual’ will be introduced; however, now it is necessary to recall Catherine Bell’s objection to the traditional, established, way of categorizing the two, both in anthropology and in religious studies. In *Ritual Thought, Ritual Practice* (1992) Bell argues that the opposition between ‘thought’ and ‘action’ or ‘theory’ and ‘praxis’ has tainted the whole Western intellectual enterprise and is specifically at work in

<sup>29</sup> Tobin Siebers, *The Romantic Fantastic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> In Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: Routledge, 1948), p. 139.

<sup>31</sup> See the database of the ‘Super-Enlightenment’ texts at: [collections.stanford.edu/supere](http://collections.stanford.edu/supere)

definitions of 'ritual' as a repetitive activity the 'body' engages in according to a set of rules, while the 'mind' is not engaged.<sup>32</sup> 'Myth', on the other hand, would count on the side of 'thought', or symbolic explanation of specific natural phenomena, social practices, institutions and taboos. What is obsolete in this approach is that it is unaware of being the product of a specific and historical frame of mind, that of the cosmopolitan educated classes from the West. It does not even start to contemplate the possibility that there may be alternative perspectives or categories. This is where reading literature anthropologically yields rich possibilities for cultural observation and reflection on the way what sociologist and psychoanalyst Castoriadis (1987) calls the 'social-historical' dimension and the 'imaginary' constantly shape and constrain each other into specific forms. Later chapters provide the reader both with an introduction to Castoriadis' ideas and a more holistic definition of 'myth' and 'ritual(ization)', for the purpose of reading literature anthropologically.

For the time being, however, it is useful to bear in mind the following two points: 1. Regardless of whether 'myth' or 'ritual' precede or depend on each other, they often (but not always) interact in 'religion' and 'magic'. 2. 'Religion' and 'magic' are concepts beset with difficulties when it comes to defining them from an analytical perspective. It all depends on the focus of the specific discipline dealing with these 'practices' or 'phenomena'. Thus an anthropological stance emphasizes the social praxis people engage in, while historians of religion often assume a phenomenological stance. With this broad generalization we touch upon a core issue: that of the viewpoint in the observation of 'magic' (and 'religion'). While social anthropologists in the past tended to adopt an etic point of view, a detached and 'objective', 'neutral' approach to the subject, historians of religion have hypothesized the existence of an (abstract) *homo religiosus par excellence*, and have proceeded to see each religion as a particular expression of the *homo religiosus*' sensibility and outlook. They have assumed a perspective that tries to make sense of the religious 'phenomenon', focusing on the participants' experiences and beliefs. More recently, anthropologists have reached the point of questioning the opposition of etic/emic and have argued for the need of adopting both, switching from one to the other as required by the circumstances and the task at hand. I agree with this most recent anthropological stance. However, I would

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

like to push it a bit further, and state that reading literature anthropologically entails more than switching from one modality to the other at will; rather, being able to hold both perspectives, etic and emic, at once, thus situating oneself in an imaginary fluid in-between space. In this sense, fiction that blurs mimesis and fantasy facilitates the enactment of this very process in the reader's consciousness, as I will argue later. In other words, literature can be considered a privileged 'field' where the reader can reconcile divergent and convergent thinking, action, thought and feeling. Logos and mythos are not so much opposites as complementary modes of consciousness, which play a key role in reading (and enjoying) literature fully. So far 'magic' has been considered as an anthropological concept. Let us turn to the relation between 'magic' and literature, or, better still, to literature as 'magic'.

### 1.3 The 'Magic' of Literature since the Inception of 'Modernity'

As T. S. Eliot stated in the famous essay 'The metaphysical poets' (1921), the English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century had the ability to conceive 'sensuous thoughts': for them thought and images were, apparently, one and the same unified process.<sup>33</sup> The advancement of modernization, technological and industrial development, rationalism and science has brought about the progressive erosion of this ability and of the value ascribed to it. Instead, as Bruno Latour has shown (1993), 'modernity' has gone in the direction of conceptualizing purity as the separation of the material and the spiritual, while simultaneously allowing for the proliferation of hybrids as the very basis of Western 'nature-cultures', whereby he concludes that 'we have never been modern'.<sup>34</sup> In my analysis of *Lanark*, I dwell on this topic. Here, however, it must be stressed that as far as magic is concerned, it cannot be denied that during the Renaissance it was still considered a worthy intellectual pursuit amongst the educated classes, while the popular classes would preserve their own folklore and practices even until much more recent times. On the other hand, even if the Enlightenment's campaign against 'superstition' brought this era to a close

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October, 1921.

<sup>34</sup> Bruno Latour, *We have Never been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

officially, the eighteenth century was a remarkable time for the invention and re-creation of ritual, especially in the context of Freemasonry, such as Cagliostro's renowned 'Egyptian rite'.<sup>35</sup>

Literature has frequently been conceived as 'magic' in reaction to modernization itself between the end of the eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth centuries, and it was appropriated by innovative artistic movements in the first two decades of the twentieth century, following the 'discovery' of the unconscious, and, finally, it has been reworked in contemporary fiction. All these different ways of envisioning literature as magic and/or incorporating magical motifs in literature have been shaped by specific and unique historical conditions. Accordingly, many writers devised creative solutions, which have – explicitly or implicitly – linked the practice of literature with the practice of 'magic'.

However, this study focuses on a less explored aspect of the literary magic, the reading process. While examining the way different literary movements posited the relation between magic and literature – mainly from the author's perspective and implicitly from the audience's – the focus is directed on the creative interaction between text and reader during the reading process, an interaction which fulfils a specific aesthetic response, as described by Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading*.<sup>36</sup> This focuses on the way a reader's aesthetic response is in great measure pre-structured by the way the text is organised, and can only produce a limited plethora of meanings as a result of this pre-structuring. This is in fact the guarantee of the reader's creative involvement in the text. However, as Michael Burke has suggested in his survey of the cognitive study of literary reading processing and discourse analysis (*Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion*: 2011), the reader provides affective inputs which are of an unconscious nature during his reading and indeed also before and after it, while preparing himself and reflecting or elaborating what he has read.<sup>37</sup> This means that literary reading involves both 'mind-fed' and 'sign-fed' elements which interact in a continuous back and forth movement or 'oceanic' flow.

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<sup>35</sup> Several books on Cagliostro have been written. For a recent one, see Henry R. Evans, *Cagliostro and his Egyptian Rite of Freemasonry* (Lafayette, LA: Cornerstone Book Publishers, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>37</sup> Michael Burke, *Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion: an Exploration of the Oceanic Mind* (New York; London: Routledge, 2011).



Burke shows how the different elements of mood and location of the reading, together with literary styles, themes and reading imagery interact in the reading process in a sort of 'literary reading loop' (2011: 153). Burke also considers the topic of reader's epiphany, or what he calls 'disportation'. He is only interested in what happens to real readers of literary texts. On the other hand, this present study does consider what happens while reading what I later define as 'hybrid fiction', but postulates the existence of a virtual space between text and embodied consciousness, where what is expected of the implied reader and what happens in an embodied reader cross and blend. Winnicott's ideas about 'transitional objects' or stages, expressed in his *Playing and Reality* (1971), are important here.<sup>38</sup>

According to this psychiatrist, the space which the mother had occupied is filled with toys and play, and later with culture and art: transitional objects and phenomena, which play a fundamental role in human culture. Thus, to Iser's project of an anthropology of literature based on the interplay of 'the fictive and the imaginary', as laid out in his 1993 volume of the same name and in subsequent papers,<sup>39</sup> I suggest adding the element of 'ritualization', as a transitional stage and a process specific to non-realistic fiction reading, and particularly the hybrid genre of what, in a subsequent chapter, will be called 'deformed romance'. This ritualization process in turn can reshape, alter, or de-structure readers' perceptions and predispositions. Thus reading is a practice which can be both etic and emic in the way these terms are used in ethnography, objectivised and detached on one hand, subjective on the other.

The first revival of the 'fantastic' and the strange in Britain was linked to the very process of rationalization and the rise of scientific knowledge and

<sup>38</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971; London: Routledge 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Wolfgang Iser defines the act of fictionalising in the following way, among others:

'Fiction and fictionalizing entail a duality, the liar must conceal the truth, but the truth is potentially present in the mask disguising it. In literary fictions, existing worlds are overstepped, and although they are individually still recognizable, they are set in a context that defamiliarizes them. Thus both lie and literature contain two worlds: the lie incorporates the truth and the purpose for which it must be concealed; literary fictions incorporate an identifiable reality that is subjected to an unforeseeable refashioning. And when we describe fictionalizing as an act of overstepping, we must bear in mind that the reality overstepped is not left behind: it remains present, thereby imbuing fiction with a duality that may be exploited for different purposes.' 'The Significance of Fictionalizing', *Anthropoetics III*, no. 2 (Fall 1997 / Winter 1998), [http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/iser\\_fiction.htm](http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/iser_fiction.htm), [accessed 08/08/2010] As to the imaginary, Iser borrows the notion from Cornelius Castoriadis, who, in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987), defines it as 'magma', an indefinite, fluid and diffuse matrix of original creativity, not only at individual level, but also of all social and historical institutions. Later in the text, Castoriadis' point of view will be explored in some detail.

mentality following in the wake of the first industrial revolution. This coupled with the widening market for novels opened up new possibilities for writers. The classical gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole 'was the earliest and most important manifestation of late-eighteenth-century revival of romance'.<sup>40</sup> In Walpole's own words:

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance [romance proper and the novel], the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if in the latter species Nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances. The actions, sentiments, conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion. (quoted in Punter, 1980: 50)

If 'Walpole deliberately sets out to flout realist conventions' (Punter 1980: 50), in Anne Radcliffe's *Udolpho*, the boundaries of reality and fantasy [are] blurred and softened, although she usually finished her books with rational explanations of seemingly uncanny events: Matthew Gregory Lewis (in *The Monk*), taking the anti-realist process a step further, begins the essentially Gothic construction of a world of mutually self-validating fictions which are texturally more 'real' than reality itself' (70). Lewis had been influenced by the German *Schauerroman*, and his novel was the most scandalous example of the Gothic.

The German Gothic, however, had its own distinct characteristics. According to Barry Murnane (2012),

[...] the term *Schauerroman* shows how the German gothic was part of late-Enlightenment anthropological and aesthetic traditions. The basis of this dimension of affective poetics was the concept that a reader can experience a form of pleasure through fearfulness. [...] If the (super)-natural horrors can be rationally explained or if the violence, wild landscapes, and labyrinthine dungeons in these novels can be identified as providing a reassuring effect for the readers, then the *frisson* of the *Schauerroman* can hardly be considered a form of counter-Enlightenment fiction anymore [...]. Instead it appears to be a medium in which rationally thinking readers can engage in a form of self-fashioning by which they portray themselves as having overcome

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<sup>40</sup> David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: a History of Gothic Fictions from 1766 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 49.

the archaic fear of the sublime and can now enjoy such titillating pleasures.

Nonetheless,

Perhaps it makes sense to view the gothic novel around 1800 as a black box containing those difficulties being negotiated by a society thrust headlong into the capitalist, bureaucratic, and industrial conditions of modernity; by this logic the discourse of 'Lust an der Angst' [pleasure of horror] in the Enlightenment was no more than a Trojan horse leading to a challenging of Enlightenment principles through the forms of *Schauerromantik*.<sup>41</sup>

The Gothic trend was to remain an undercurrent throughout the nineteenth century, in Walter Scott's historical novels and in the most sensational passages of Charles Dickens' fiction. It is also significant that the Surrealist manifesto would refer later to Lewis' fiction as a supreme example of the total liberation of the imagination.

As far as the Romantics are concerned, M. H. Abrams, in his classic study of German and English Romanticism, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), tracks points of continuity and rupture between Romanticism and the Christian legacy in some detail.<sup>42</sup> German and English Romantics drew on Renaissance philosophical and mystical thought (i.e. Hermeticism, Jacob Boehme and Giordano Bruno), as well as on Plotinus' thought, in order to formulate their own visions of life as a journey or pilgrimage back to the Source. However, they replaced the static Neoplatonic symbol of the circle with the spiral, which symbolizes upward movement and integration of different stages of spiritual evolution on a higher plane of existence. The metaphor of life as a journey or a quest and the vision of man as a wanderer or pilgrim go back both to Pagan and Christian notions. The Romantics infused man's quest with infinite aspiration and approximation to, rather than attainment of, perfection. For some of them the object of the quest was immanent, for others it had a transcendental character. At the same time, some Romantics usually trust in the goodness of man and in his inner progress, while others are much more sinister and use irony to express

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<sup>41</sup> Barry Murnane, 'Haunting (Literary) History: An Introduction to German Gothic', in Andrew Cusak and Barry Murnane (eds.), *Popular Revenants, The German Gothic and Its International Reception 1800-2000* (Rochester; New York: Camden House, 2012), pp. 10-43, (here pp. 18 and 23).

<sup>42</sup> M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

the precarious condition of the human being, his alienation in the context of a philistine daily life which can be redeemed only by art and the imagination.

Novalis, the Schlegels, Hölderlin, Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley are all visionaries in their own ways, the last three being respectively a prophet, a bard and an utopian revolutionary, while Walpole, Lewis, Tieck, Brentano, Hoffmann are more pessimistic, albeit advocating the possibility of healing the split individual, usually an artist, through the imagination. The German Romantics invented the literary fairy tale, which to Novalis was ‘the canon of poetry’<sup>43</sup> and was characterised by the conflation of the everyday with the supernatural or the uncanny. In Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, for example, ‘Die Welt wird Traum, der Traum wird Welt’ (*Gesammelte Werke*, I, p. 304). Novalis links the fairy tale to a new way of perceiving the world: ‘Der Welt muss romantisiert werden’, the poet perceives the world through the magical mirror of the imagination and creates something anew:

The world must be romanticized. This yields again its original meaning. Romanticizing is nothing else than a qualitative potentization. In this operation the lower self becomes identified with a better self. Just as we ourselves are a potential series of this kind. This operation is still entirely unknown. By giving the common a higher meaning, the everyday, a mysterious semblance, the known, the dignity of the unknown, the finite, the appearance of the infinite, I romanticize it—For what is higher, unknown, mystical, infinite, one uses the inverse operation—in this manner it becomes logarithmicized—It receives a common expression. Romantic philosophy, *Lingua romana*. Reciprocal raising and lowering.<sup>44</sup>

This new creation is something, I argue, that the reader is called to do by enacting and recreating imaginatively the various possibilities opened up in the text.

Whether in poetry or fairy-tales, the German and English Romantics usually articulate the condition of the artist as a unique individual (although for Wordsworth the poet is ‘a man speaking to other men’). In most Romantics, this individualism exists side by side with admiration for folk culture. Their attitudes towards the reader would constitute an interesting and useful study in itself.

The tension between individualism and admiration for folk culture was expressed through the exploration of the supernatural and the secret folds of

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<sup>43</sup> Novalis, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Carl Seelig, 5 voll. (Zürich: Bühl Verlag, 1945-1946), IV, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, ed. by David D. Wood (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 2007), p. xvi

the individual's soul through the medium of fantasy. Indeed fantastic literature became increasingly popular and almost all Romantic authors explored it in various degrees. The debate on 'the marvellous' was open.

For example, in an article for *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, Sir Walter Scott stated his dislike of Hoffmann's fantastic tales on the grounds that 'the marvellous, more than any other attribute of fictitious narrative, loses its effect by being brought much into view. The imagination of the reader is to be excited if possible, without being gratified.'<sup>45</sup> Yet, Hoffmann's tales were highly fashionable and were to influence many eminent writers. Here, for example, is E.T.A. Hoffmann's address to the reader in his *Der Goldne Topf* (*The Golden Pot*), 'A Modern Fairy-Tale':

[...] You are now, kind reader, in the fairy realm of glorious wonders, whose mighty strokes summon up both supreme bliss and extreme horror, and where the grave goddess raises her veil so that we may fancy we see her face—but her grave expression often breaks into a smile, and that is the impish humour that teases us with *bewilderments of magic*, as a mother often teases her dearest children. In this realm, which our spirit so often reveals to us, at least in our dreams, try, kind reader, to recognize the well-known shapes that, as the saying goes, cross your path every day. You will then believe that this magnificent realm is much nearer at hand than you had previously thought; and that is what I heartily wish you to believe, and what the strange story of Anselmus is supposed to convey.<sup>46</sup>

'Magic' is recognized as the key factor necessary to reveal a shadow dimension of ordinary reality, contiguous and continuous with it, to the reader. Indeed ordinary reality and the 'fairy realm' turn into each other quite seamlessly in Hoffmann's tale and also in *The Iguana* by Anna Maria Ortese, who expressed her admiration for the English and German Romantics, and *Measuring the World* by Daniel Kehlmann. While Ortese intends to convey the 'mystery of the Universe' (*Corpo Celeste*: 1997) embodied in a monster that represents the most abjected aspects of nature,<sup>47</sup> together with its deep impenetrability, Kehlmann employs humour in order to satirize our contemporary apprehension of the transcendental thrust of German high romanticism and to show how it was

<sup>45</sup> Walter Scott, 'On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition; and particularly on the works of Ernst Theodore William [sic] Hoffmann', *The Foreign Quarterly Review* 1; 1 (1827): 60-98 (p. 63).

<sup>46</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Golden Pot*, trans. by Ritchie Robertson (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 20-1, emphasis mine.

<sup>47</sup> Anna Maria Ortese, *Corpo Celeste* (Milano: Adelphi, 1997).

different from our own age. However, both make a conspicuous use of ‘magic’ to entice the reader. Ortese, like Hoffmann, makes appeals to the reader directly and, by so doing, intends to enmesh him into this strange ‘fairy realm’ in order to leave him stranded on the beach of epistemological uncertainty. In *Lanark* a dystopian ‘fairy realm’ swallows up, quite literally, the ordinary: the latter, we are told, exists in the framework of the former, while the reader’s and author’s roles are discussed in the meta-fictional ‘Epilogue’. Although the setting of *Lanark* has dystopian and science-fictional overtones, Gray himself recognizes the importance of ‘nursery tales’ in the ‘Epilogue’, albeit ironically, and more explicitly in interviews.<sup>48</sup>

The ‘fairy realm’ is of fundamental import for all three authors, who rework its codes and strategies in different ways. Why is this realm so important? The pages of the novels function as a neutral space, where the imaginary reshapes the ordinary and, through constellations of mythical and ritual motifs and images combined in strange ways, they allow for the ritualization of the reader’s embodied consciousness. By this expression I mean the empowerment of the reader through the reading process which entails his inhabiting of a liminal dimension, by following pre-structured patterns and engaging in creative meaning-making through the co-existence of a double focus, both detached and subjective. In particular, this double perspective can come about only as a consequence of the patterning of fiction and is a prerogative of texts that criss-cross different genres and modes and blend the most fantastic elements with the most ordinary. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who like Poe was particularly influenced by E.T.A. Hoffmann, thus defined the term ‘romance’ in ‘The Custom House’ Preface to *The Scarlet Letter*: ‘a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other.’<sup>49</sup>

Indeed Ortese, Kehlmann and Gray all use this romance ‘strategy’, in various ways, and exaggerate its grotesque potential for deformation and estrangement of ‘the well-known shapes’ of every day life. They also deform the structure of the mythical quest by baffling the protagonist’s heroism in the sense

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<sup>48</sup> For example, ‘Ach Well, an Interview with Alasdair Gray’, at <http://www.laurahird.com/newreview/alsadairgray.html>, accessed <14 October 2011>, and Mark Axelrod, ‘A Conversation with Alasdair Gray’, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Summer 1995).

<sup>49</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; repr. New York; London: Penguin Classics, 1983), p. 38.

conceived by Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), whereby the mono-myth always entails the departure, adventure and coming back of the hero with treasure for his fellows.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Campbell adopted the idea of the ritual's threefold structure (separation, trials or symbolic death and reintegration into society), elaborated by anthropologist Van Gennep in his *The Rites of Passage* (1908). While the hero or the heroine of a romance goes out on a 'quest', it is worth focusing on what the reader is doing in following the vicissitudes of the protagonist. Whereas realistic fiction and formulaic fantasy foster a high degree of identification or, an utter critical distance, fictions that blend 'the actual' and 'the imaginary' go beyond this stark opposition. What is at stake is no longer intellectual belief or disbelief, for the 'willing suspension of disbelief' postulated by Coleridge is only the first stage of the reading experience. Imagination is not linked primarily to abstract belief, but is in itself an elemental force<sup>51</sup> which, I add, is unleashed in the liminal space inhabited by the reader's embodied consciousness for the time of the reading. Imagination is sensuous and embodied: a heightening of the senses and perception, whereby the engaged reader recreates what is familiar in a sort of numinous experience.

The Irish poet William Butler Yeats is explicit in his collection of essays *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903) in linking up 'magic' and 'imagination'.<sup>52</sup> He upholds the following 'doctrines' which have been 'the foundation of nearly all magical practices':

- (1) That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
- (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
- (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. ('Magic', p. 29)

He then continues, expounding on 'emotional' and 'intellectual' symbols, and the activity of the imagination:

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers, whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half

<sup>50</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949; repr. London: Fontana Press, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> John Sallis, *Force of the Imagination: the Sense of the Elemental* (Indiana University Press: 2000).

<sup>52</sup> William B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: 1903).

unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist. ('Magic', p. 64)

[...] imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and the patterns in that great Mind, and that great Memory [...] ('Magic', p. 68)

Although these statements may sound too mystical to some contemporary ears, contemporary biologist Rupert Sheldrake's insight into the interplay of creativity and patterning in the context of the wider cosmos is based on a similar view. In fact, in his holistic perspective expressed in the book *The Rebirth of Nature: the Greening of Science and God*, first published in 1991, he presents a systematic reconstruction of the historical circumstances that brought about the 'disenchantment of the world' from the Protestant Reformation to rationalism, secularization, and technological advancement in the West. He shows how Descartes envisioned a mechanical and soulless world of mechanical matter, while '[t]he soul was also withdrawn from the human body, which became a mechanical automaton, leaving only the rational soul, the conscious mind, in a small region of the brain [...]' (50). However, 'the machine analogy breaks down when it comes to understanding the growth and development of organisms, their morphogenesis' (103). Sheldrake also shows how contemporary science has moved far away from this conception, through the idea of 'gravitational field', which explains the phenomenon of gravitation:

Like the *anima mundi*, Einstein's gravitational field is not in space and time; rather, it contains the entire physical world, including space and time. The gravitational field is space-time, and its geometrical properties are the cause of gravitational phenomena; it acts as a formative or formal cause, like the souls of medieval philosophy. [...] In the present century, the field concept has been extended to gravitation and to the matter fields of quantum physics, making field more fundamental than matter. (82-83)

These matter fields are states of space, or of the vacuum. But the vacuum is not empty; it is full of energy and undergoes spontaneous fluctuations that can create new quanta 'from nothing'. (87)

The result is that all nature is now thought to consist of fields and energy. Energy, like Aristotelian matter, can exist in many different forms. In Aristotelian physics, these forms were organised by souls; in modern physics, they are organised by fields. (89)



Where does this leave us for the purposes of the present study concerned with an anthropology of literature and the reading experience? The definition of morphogenetic fields provides the necessary conceptual link:

According to the hypothesis of formative causation, they are a new kind of field so far unknown to physics with an intrinsically evolutionary nature. The fields of a given species [...] contain a kind of *collective memory* on which each member of the species draws and to which it in turn contributes. The formative activity of the fields is not determined by timeless mathematical laws [...] but by the actual forms taken up by previous members of the species. [...] The fields are the means by which the habits of the species are built up, maintained, and inherited. (110, my emphasis)

This inherited ‘collective memory’, which is the biological equivalent of Jung’s notion of the Collective Unconscious, extends to humans and their societies. Sheldrake thus explains ‘rituals’ as a way of really bringing the past into the present through repetitive and, also, patterned activity, which taps into the morphogenetic field handed down by the ancestors. The fact that new generations of individuals also contribute to this morphogenetic field through their own activities means that an interplay of creativity and habit takes place at all times, as variation is always possible.

What do nature, a ritual dance and literature have in common? They all have in common patterning, the interplay of recurrences and variations. When we read fiction we are drawing from and contributing to this collective memory and activate cognitive and emotional patterns in our body-mind continuum through the transmission of information and energy. The movement of this energy is the flow of the imagination, a flux in the fluid reservoir of the imaginary, which is indistinct, yet takes on concrete shapes in social and psychological life. When the focus of the artist is on the inner realms of the imagination, on what is not given, Surrealism is the result. On the contrary, when the artist focuses on the social dimension of the imaginary, with its symbols and beliefs, Magical Realism ensues. In 1924 André Breton wrote the famous ‘Manifesto of Surrealism’, which gathered the fundamental ideas of the movement:

I believe in the future resolution of these two states which are dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality.

Surrealism [...] is a pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express [...] the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral control.

Surrealism is not a new means of expression [...] It is a means of total liberation of the mind and everything resembling it.

Automatism [...] remains one of the two major trends of surrealism.

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.

The well-known lack of frontiers between non-madness and madness does not induce me to accord a different value to the perceptions and ideas which are the result of one or the other.<sup>53</sup>

Surrealism was much influenced by Freud and saw in the practice of automatic writing an authentic outlet for the unconscious. It is interesting that this practice was first used by Victorian spiritualists as a technique of communication with the spirits or the 'collective memory'.

On the other hand, Magical Realism intends to distort and change our perception of the world, by challenging the Western commonsense view of reality. The origin of the term is disputed, but it has been tracked back to German art critic Franz Roh and Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli, both particularly active in the twenties and thirties. In its transmigration to Latin America and later to other international contexts, Magical Realism has become a sort of political flag to oppose European rule over the colonies, but has been also exploited by European artists for its destabilizing potential. Magical Realism brings together realism and elements from non-Western world-views, presenting them without surprise or hesitation. Magical Realism is more explicitly political than Surrealism and has been associated with postcolonial struggles since the sixties. However, both forms of literature, in their more radical and politically engaged examples, are subversive in that they suggest that reality can be perceived anew through imagination and magic, and they reject bourgeois commonsense. Both forms of literature refer more or less explicitly to different

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<sup>53</sup> André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism' (1924), trans. by J. Butler (1999)  
<[www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/Manifest.Surrealism.htm](http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/Manifest.Surrealism.htm) [accessed on 1st October 2011]

ways of experiencing and knowing, usually favouring the imaginary over intellectual abstraction and analysis, which are regarded as belated epiphenomena of the human consciousness.

## 1.4 A New Approach: Mythos, Logos and Literature

I have described above what I intend by the term ‘ritualization’. Indeed, there is some degree of ritualization in all fiction, but it is hidden in completely realistic or fantastic fiction. In fact, while strictly realistic fiction has in it an element of reification of the factual world, formulaic fantasy fiction is characterised by the ‘ossification’, a term I borrow from Iser (1993), of the fictional world. In hybrid fiction, however, ritualization is played out fully in the interaction between logos and mythos and its workings are revealed purposely. While realistic and fantastic fictions work through ‘the willing suspension of disbelief’, subversive hybrid fiction does not require the reader’s belief. It requires him to be open to new ways of ‘seeing’ and to look at the workings of his own mind and emotions while ‘playing’ the text, in order to activate the imagination in critical thought and sensibility, and provides him with a potentially transformational experience. In ritualization, the mode of logos entails following the patterned logic of the narrative, while mythos appeals to the emotions through images, thus setting in motion the flow of the imagination, an enhanced image-making process, which constitutes a habitat through landscapes, soundscapes and other imaginary creations involving all the senses. It thus constitutes a virtual space which is experienced as liminal, and also directs the logical dimension through a sort of subliminal entrainment or undercurrent. More has to be added regarding the integration of these two modes of consciousness: mythos and logos.

Susan Greenwood states that ‘magic is a natural process of the human mind’.<sup>54</sup> Drawing on her personal experiences of practicing magic in her anthropological fieldwork, Greenwood also elaborates a convincing ‘dynamic model’ (2009, 148) for reconciling magic and science as two bodies of knowledge to be included to the vast web of different kinds of knowledge elaborated by humans. The image of the web, which can be laid across a flowing river,

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<sup>54</sup> Susan Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic: the Anthropology of Consciousness* (Oxford; New York: Berg Publishers, 2005), p. xii.

representing historical time, is drawn from the work of anthropologist and physicist Geoffrey Samuel.<sup>55</sup> Through this model it is possible to maintain a historical perception of how the various bodies of knowledge evolved through history, including magic and science. Borrowing these insights, it is possible to see literature and art in general as yet another kind of knowledge, a kind of expressive and experiential knowledge that acts at the same time on the reader's emotions, cognition and imagination. If we take a cross-section of the river image we can see how at different historical periods, different bodies of knowledge evolved and crystallized. Greenwood also refers to anthropologist Gregory Bateson's ideas of 'ideation' and 'abduction', in order to reconcile everyday consciousness, scientific rationality and magical consciousness:

Abduction is the patterns we make in our minds to understand and explain a given phenomenon or set of beliefs (ideation) and the web is a metaphorical conceptual space where all the abductive patterns can be examined. This includes areas of experience that have been restricted due to the history of emphasis on rationality and reason. [...] The very fact that we all have the potential capability for magical consciousness means that this orientation of human experience must be incorporated into the wider picture. It opens up the imagination in a manner previously unrealized. [...] Imagination gives the human world an intrinsically dynamic order which self-conscious individuals are continually in the process of forming and designing. We can make a shift from examining magic only through its sociological or psychological effects, or solely as a logical classificatory mode of thinking akin to the older conceptualization of science, to a highly specific human mode of mind. (2009: 156-57)

We now come full circle in our definition of magic: magic is both (1) a technology in the form of rhetorical art and (2) a mode of consciousness, which, I would like to add, makes use of image-making. This is what happens in ritual, art, poetry<sup>56</sup> and hybrid fiction, the kind with which this study deals. Indeed reading hybrid fiction is a practice which by enabling us, to conceive the 'unconceivable' Other, allows us to find the Other in ourselves.

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<sup>55</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, *Mind, Body and Culture: Anthropology of the Biological Interface* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>56</sup> See Jerome Rothenberg (ed), *Technicians of the Sacred* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1968, [1985]) for a wonderful anthology of 'primitive' poetry from all over the world, as 'complex' rather than 'simple', and 'contemporary' rather than from a pre-literate past. I am indebted to my supervisor Professor Laurence Davies for bringing my attention to this unique collection.

## 1.5 Methodology

I have stated that this study focuses on the reader's experience. To be more precise, it focuses on the *process* of reading, as something which unfolds phenomenologically. This means that an *encounter* between reader and text happens and in hybrid texts this encounter takes the form of ritualization. Contemporary philosopher of science Bortoft states:

If we watch a bird flying across the sky and put our attention into seeing flying instead of seeing a bird which flies (implying a separation between an entity, 'bird', and an action, 'flying', which it performs), we can experience this in the mode of a dynamical simultaneity as one whole event. By plunging into seeing flying we find that our attention expands to experience this movement as one whole that is its own present moment. (quoted in Greenwood, 2009: 150)

In the same way, this study approaches literary reading as a holistic encounter, and the reading of hybrid fiction as a ritualization process. In order to attain this goal, I develop a methodology which is inspired by the 'emergence of narrative ethnography' as a shift 'from participant observation to the observation of participation', as explained by the anthropologist Barbara Tedlock in an article of the same title:

In the ethnographic memoir, an author takes us back to a corner of his or her life in the field that was unusually vivid, full of affect, or framed by unique events. By narrowing the lens, these authors provide a window into their personal life in the field, a focus which would not be possible in a full-length autobiography. The author of a narrative ethnography also deals with experiences, but along with these come ethnographic data, epistemological reflections on fieldwork participation, and cultural analysis. The world, in a narrative ethnography, is represented as perceived by a situated narrator, who is also present as a character in the story that reveals his own personality. This enables the reader to identify the consciousness which has selected and shaped the experiences within the text. *In contrast to memoirs, narrative ethnographies focus not on the ethnographer herself, but rather on the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue or encounter.*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Barbara Tedlock, 'From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: the Emergence of Narrative Ethnography', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47; 1 (September, 1991), 69-94 (here, pp. 77-8, emphasis mine).

In order to explore the experience of reading the novels by Ortese, Gray and Kehlmann, I adopt a method analogous to that of narrative ethnography in that I practice what I call ‘creative reading’ and regard the text as ‘alive’, because of its ability to ask the reader questions and responses, which can lead to epiphanic experiences too. Here, although I agree with Burke (2011) about the real possibility for the reader to experience an epiphany, I don’t agree with him when he sees in epiphany the manifestation of emotions which are prompted by the text but ultimately shaped by the reader’s memory of his personal past, and particularly, his childhood. Instead, I argue that epiphanic reading experiences can also be progressive, that is present and future-oriented, not always and exclusively about nostalgia for the past and fear of death.

While anthropologists deal with other *selves*, the literary critic deals with a *text*. However, the meaning-making in the reading process is always socially situated, communal and inter-subjective, as the encounter between reader and text is also an encounter between the reader’s subjectivity and the creative product of the author’s subjectivity.

By ‘creative reading’ I mean a reflexive process in two stages, preceded by a preliminary phase in which I clarify how as a reader I am situated towards the chosen texts, my mood and previous acquaintance with each of them, and how many times I have read them, and followed by a reflective comment after some time has elapsed since the reading proper. The latter is articulated in the following two stages. The first stage is reading which is slow and entails taking quick notes or marking passages which provoke emotive reactions and thoughts. During the reading I mark with a coloured crayon the passages which spark affective associations and strike my attention because of particular macro-metaphors and motifs and clusters of motifs. The second stage entails a reading journal to be compiled immediately after the reading session, in order to report the associations sparked by the marked passages, and not to lose the immediacy of the experience as far as it is possible. During this stage, I practise a sort of focused report writing: the focus is provided by the experience of reading, but I cannot raise the pen from the sheet, and, I write quickly, so that I don’t elaborate and add non-relevant and later elements to it. As observed, the purpose of this is to preserve the immediacy of the reading process. After the ‘creative reading’, the last stage is the writing of comments on the reading journal entries, some time later, in order to allow for some reflective distance.

Thus I report my personal experiences, but do not indulge in solipsism: I interrogate the text and let the text interrogate me. In other words, I focus on my experience of reading the three novels, because of the immediacy of the data thus available to me, in order to show how as a reader of hybrid fiction it is possible to be in the liminal space I have already mentioned and be at once inside and outside the text.

## 1.6 Some Concluding Remarks: Anthropology of Literature or Literary Anthropology?

Throughout this study I use the two expressions interchangeably. However, a clarification is needed. My endeavour is to provide a framework that can bridge the gap between expressive or aesthetic theories and functional theories of literature. Therefore, it is founded by definition in what Richard van Ort in his essay entitled 'The Critic as Ethnographer' (2004) calls 'originary anthropology', the acknowledgement of the fact that 'it is culture that itself originated in symbolic-mimetic paradox. Culture is both a representation and a performance, a 'model of' and a 'model for':

Scientific definitions of the human ignore this paradox as a matter of course. From a purely scientific vantage point, attributing an exceptional status to human origin seems like false hubris. But from an anthropological point of view, we have no choice but to consider human origin as exceptional because the very fact that we are self-conscious of this origin, in a way that other species are not, compels us to seek an explanation for it. Whether the explanation for human origin be conceived in the form of a myth, a science or a literary anthropology, all are equally attempts to respond to the fundamental mimetic paradox that led to the origin of the cultural scene of symbolic representation. (653)

In my readings of the novels, as I have already mentioned, my focus is twofold, in that different chapters track the issue of modernity in the texts and report my practice of a 'creative reading process'. The reason for this is that I am interested in showing how anthropology of literature can cover a wide scope, ranging from more traditional text analysis to the unearthing of epistemological foundational issues in the reading process, understood as an interaction between reader and text. Thus anthropology of literature as conceived here is *per se* a

literary anthropology, rather than an external application of anthropological ideas to literature.



## 2 A Step Beyond the Mimetic Bias

### 2.1 Performative Fantasy Impulse

In the previous chapter I dwelt on the concept of magic both in anthropology and literature. It is now necessary to spell out what a magical view of fantastic and hybrid fiction entails and how mimesis and fantasy interweave in such fiction. Accordingly, this chapter deals with a performative idea of the fantastic impulse in some contemporary magical realist<sup>58</sup> and postmodern fictions: the chosen novels (*The Iguana* by Anna Maria Ortese, *Lanark* by Alasdair Gray and *Measuring the World* by Daniel Kehlmann) do not ‘depict reality,’ rather they enact those dynamic forces and processes that we essentialize as common sense ‘reality’. Therefore, by doing so, they expose realism in its arbitrariness and selectiveness, while also pointing to the fluidity of human meaning-making. While the mimetic impulse fills up the gaps in the reader’s imagination, providing an apparently solid background and a ‘reliable’ narrative context, the fantastic impulse is ‘visionary’ in that it unfolds its possibilities according to the reader’s imaginative powers, in this sense it is always ‘romantic’, acknowledging the existence of the ineffable and the creative struggle to catch a glimpse of it. The two impulses coexist and complement each other in differing measures in all fiction. As Kathryn Hume in *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984) argues, fantasy, in its non-formulaic manifestations, is much more than a secondary and frivolous phenomenon.<sup>59</sup> In order to understand it, it is necessary to go beyond the assumptions which have conditioned its study, namely:

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<sup>58</sup> A magical realist fiction is a fiction that frames fantastic or supernatural events in the context of a detached, ‘objective’ or at least realistic narrative. The term originated in Germany and Italy in the twenties and has been subsequently applied to Latin American novels, especially by Miguel Ángel Asturias, Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Magical realist fiction has now entered its international and postcolonial phase: Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Günter Grass and Milan Kundera are among the most famous authors who have practiced magic realism. As far as postmodern fiction is concerned, Mark Currie in *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (2011) points out three defining characteristics: reflexivity on the relationship between reality and fiction, intertextuality and representation of a globalised world run by technology. However he recognizes that these features are not the preserve of postmodern fiction only and therefore its definition remains problematic.

<sup>59</sup> Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York; London: Methuen, 1984).

(1) That the essential impulse behind literature is mimesis, (2) that fantasy is a separable and peripheral phenomenon, (3) that, because separable, it is pure and best defined by exclusion. (20)

Here is Kathryn Hume's definition of mimesis and fantasy:

Literature is the product of two impulses. These are mimesis, felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, situations, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience; and fantasy, the desire to change givens and alter reality [...] [W]e have many genres and forms, each with a characteristic blend or range of blends of the two impulses. [...] Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor. [...] As long as the departure [from consensus reality] is recognizable to the reader, we are talking about fantasy. Fantasy and mimesis together are equally important impulses, and their interaction must be studied if we are to progress in our understanding of literature. (20-5)

As anthropologist Tambiah says, magic is 'a rhetorical art,'<sup>60</sup> a ritual performance that cannot be judged on the basis of so-called 'objective' principles. The 'magic' employed in the texts of Ortese, Gray and Kehlmann functions in a similar way, and in their particular cases serves the purpose of demystification of a 'reality' constructed on psychological repression and social oppression. Thus while *Lanark* blends vision and dystopia, *Measuring the World* employs humour and magical motifs to rewrite history, and *The Iguana* is a terrible oneiric fable of oppression, they all attempt their exposure and critique of the construction of 'Western modernity'. It is for this reason that it is enlightening to read these European magical realist and fantastic texts as located on the 'inner frontier of colonialism', and therefore as a supplement to postcolonial and cross-cultural magical realism, from which they differ greatly. By referring to the 'inner frontier of colonialism', it is meant that these texts expose those European events and currents of thought that are a counterpart to the unfolding of the colonialist enterprise outside Europe and are especially connected to it.

Indeed the internationalization of the magical realist mode, in its many facets and strands, is a complex phenomenon. As Faris states in *Ordinary Enchantments* (2004), in postcolonial magical realism there are ambiguities

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<sup>60</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, 'Form and Meaning of Magical Acts', in *Culture, Thought and Social Action* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press: 1985), pp. 60-86.

which cannot be easily dismissed, such as the easy commercialization of the mode on the market, due to its alleged catering for exotic taste.<sup>61</sup>

The European texts investigated here are not particularly ambiguous in this regard. Given their relative lack of substantial reference to ‘traditional’ beliefs, they provide exotic escape only in part, as this escape soon turns into something alien. They refer to myth in a less pervasive way than their Latin American or postcolonial counterparts, yet they employ it as a structuring mode of thought which, far from being totally incompatible with historical narratives of linearity and progress, show how they both rely on the same logic: that of ‘narrativity,’ or the fact that all human ‘reality’ is fictionalized throughout, and that *homo sapiens* is, deep down, *homo narrans*. ‘History’ is thus made up, like a patchwork quilt of different ‘stories’, some of which are embroidered in stronger colours than others and therefore more ‘visible,’ but always involving human struggles, pain, victories and defeats. Thus for these writers – and for many others – myth is not, as Barthes would have it, ‘depoliticized speech’,<sup>62</sup> because ‘myth’ is the very way humans think. These novels take on myth at a much deeper level than ‘traditional’ beliefs. They take myth as a much broader phenomenon than folklore and mythology, in the sense that they recognize the workings of human imaginative thought as mythical. The texts point to the diversity of uses of mythical thinking as a deconstructive tool in these writers’ hands.

## 2.2 Myth and Fantasy

In his 1991 article on ‘Myths and the Fantastic’, Andras Sandor draws a distinction between ‘myths’ and ‘mythology’ and points out how the two cannot be reconciled.<sup>63</sup> Mythology is totalizing and systematic and as such it is the death of myths because it imposes on them a continuity and coherence which underplays their characteristic and discontinuous overlappings of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ dimensions of experience, while the latter are non-systematic, and express a peculiar and idiosyncratic view in the community that invent and transmit them. In his opinion they express the discontinuities and continuities

<sup>61</sup> Wendy B. Faris, *Ordinary Enchantments, Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Myth Today,’ in *Mythologies* (London, Vintage Books: 2009), p. 168.

<sup>63</sup> Andras Sandor, ‘Myths and the Fantastic’, *New Literary History*, Volume 22, No.2, Probing: Art, Critique, Genre (Spring, 1991), pp. 339-58.

between two worlds, that 'within' and that of 'nature' in their enigmatic character. However, ritual has the function of integrating and bridging the two worlds, thus ritual and myth are 'true' for the community which practices them. 'Moderns,' on the other hand, have turned myth into 'untrue fantasies', the inverse of 'true stories', of realistic *fiction*: we make up our reality through daily fictions, yet we want these to be 'realistic', mirroring something 'out there' that we are confining into conceptual straitjackets. Thus for the 'moderns' fantastic tales signal a scar between the child-like status and adult consciousness which is not to be healed.

Yet the fantastic, which is a deviation from a 'represented' reality, is also an unveiling, or revelation of a dynamic reality. The fantastic can be a sort of epiphanic experience for the reader. The way literature appropriates myth is fundamental to the dynamics of fantasy and works between the two poles of the narrative, or hero-quest, and the epiphany or revelatory moment inscribed in it. This journey can yield unexpected results: the journey of the hero can be open-ended, baffled, delayed, closed, frustrated, etc. The fantastic impulse is what propels the revelation beyond the given, the bare facts. It explores the hidden folds of both the individual and the collective psyches.

In order to be able to study novels which mix the fantastic and the realistic, labels such as 'postmodern fiction' and 'magical realism' are too general and leave open the question of what these texts do and how they work in the reading process. The question is why, as human beings, we like to read fantastic or hybrid fiction and how the experience can be likened to a ritualization process, whereby we, as readers, are suspended in a liminal space and time, as it happens in ethnic tribes, where the youth undergo rites of passage through the enacting of mythical stories. To this end, the concept of 'magic' as both a good rhetorical art and a state of consciousness has been introduced, as the text performs its magic in the reading process, in its interaction with the readers' consciousness.

Gary Wolfe in 'The Encounter with Fantasy' comes to the conclusion that 'fantasy is in many ways closer to daydreaming or reverie than to cognitive thought' and goes on to quote Bachelard's 'irreality [sic] function' in order to account for what he calls 'the affective sense of the impossible'.<sup>64</sup> Thus fantasy

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<sup>64</sup> Gary Wolfe, 'The Encounter with Fantasy', in Roger C. Schlobin, ed., in *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*. (Notre Dame, Indiana, and Brighton: University of Notre Dame Press and The Harvester Press: 1982), p. 6.

writers try to achieve ‘a balanced tension [...] between cognition and affect, [...] between the impossible and the inevitable’(11). Finally, Wolfe lists eight features that a good fantasy work should evoke in order to show that ‘the impossible is, after all, the real’(13):

- ‘cognition of the impossible’, when the reader realizes that the laws of reality are being contradicted;
- ‘location of the impossible’, the conjuring of a world that is half-way ‘between private psychological fantasy and culturally shared myth’;
- ‘delimitation of the impossible’, which ensures that some coherent rules inherent to the fantasy world are in place;
- ‘feeling of the impossible’, or the feeling of being in a totally ‘other’ dimension which involves the reader emotionally;
- ‘awareness of affective significance’, which makes sure that the emotional involvement of the reader ‘will be rewarded’ in the affective dimension;
- ‘awareness of cognitive significance, or ‘deeper meaning;’
- ‘belief in the fantastic world’, stemming out of the interplay between the affective and the cognitive dimensions;
- ‘deeper belief’, which makes some fantasy works into ‘analogues of inner experience virtually as valid as events of the ‘real world’, and which expresses the author’s own most fundamental convictions’.

These reflections are particularly perceptive and susceptible of being widened into considerations of fantasy as a liminal space, a sort of limbo which is always in the process of becoming, fluid and open to different interpretations. Its aleatory character is a potential which takes shape with each new reading.

Furthermore, this kind of fiction, which swings between fantasy and mimesis (and therefore can be defined as ‘hybrid’), either in a jarring, dissonant fashion or seamlessly blending the two, appropriates and deforms the strategies and structure of the quest romance. In this sense, even apparently more realistic texts can yield some surprises. The mythical is an element of all fiction, both as a ‘narrative’ and a ‘second-order sign’.<sup>65</sup> In hybrid fiction, a process of remythification happens, whereby the myths that had first been recognized as

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<sup>65</sup> William Marderness, *How to Read a Myth* (New York: Humanity Books, 2009).

such or demythologized get inscribed and reworked in the narrative, according to a new artistic vision. In fact, while mythologization involves a systematization according to an official and scholarly point of view, remythicization means that after myth has been stripped of the systematic elements (demythologization), it is once again a free-floating narrative that can be co-opted for specific artistic purposes.

This study goes in a different direction from Todorov's rationalistic structuralist definition of the fantastic (1971) and its re-adaptations (Christine Brooke-Rose: 1976, Neill Cornwell: 1990), as well as Jackson's psycho-analytical post-structuralism (1981), in that the former three locate the precincts of the fantastic solely in the reader's inability to decide between a 'supernatural' and 'natural' explanation of the events, while the last sees the fantastic as concerned exclusively with themes of morbidity, death and dissolution.<sup>66</sup> On the contrary it is argued that the fantastic, while dealing with these themes too, is ultimately about life and that non-realistic fiction can lead to (meta)-knowledge and insight, to a restructuring of our perceptual habits. Structuralist and psychoanalytic critics privilege an external 'etic' view of the fantastic, positing themselves as the rational subjects *per antonomasia*. In anthropology an 'etic' view is a 'scientific', 'detached' view, external to the phenomenon being studied, whereas an 'emic' view is that of an 'insider'. Indeed, as readers, we are called to use both modalities at different times, and sometimes, paradoxically, even simultaneously.

Another 'etic' point of view is that of Emily Apter (1981). She is cautious in applying classical psychoanalytical readings to literary texts, and rightly so. In her reading of *The Uncanny* and *Der Sandmann* she provides an alternative idea of the uncanny and of the source of fear for the protagonist of the tale: 'the fear of being unable to distinguish among perception, fear and desire' as 'central to the uncanny effect.'<sup>67</sup> This point implicitly highlights the horror of merging and instability inherent in many cultures which theorize strictly about what constitutes 'purity' and 'impurity' and consider what is liminal as dangerous and disruptive because of its ambiguity.

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<sup>66</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cleveland; London: Case Western Reserve, 1973), Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure Especially of the Fantastic* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (London; New York: Methuen, 1981).

<sup>67</sup> Emily Apter, *Fantasy Literature: An Approach to Reality* (1981) p. 38. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

In her opinion Freud's reading is more puzzling than a solution in that it does not explain 'the nature of the mind that constructs such meanings, or the terror involved in such constructions' (39):

It is arbitrary to relate the uncanny to the arousal of repressed material, for in fact the uncanny touches upon material that is frequently ignored because it is too elusive to fit into the normal framework of thought - elusive not because the material is unwanted but because it is unstable, incoherent and indefinite.' (42)

Apter shows how the psychoanalytic critic proceeds according to three different methods: either s/he considers the work as an allegory, so that its structure is ignored and the images treated singularly, or the work is seen as a 'coherent allegory' (45), therefore the interpreter follows its structure, or, finally s/he chooses 'one dominant image' (46) and goes on to interpret all the others in its light: 'thus the psychoanalytic critic proceeds as a *creator of fictions*, interpreting fictions by constructing other fictions of a biographical, historical or clinical nature' (47, my emphasis). All the same, Apter sees fantasy 'not as an escape from reality but as an investigation of it' (2). She links the term directly to its psychoanalytic usage and shows how the fantasist and the psychoanalyst share a common ground, in that:

The aim is to catch out unexpected ignorance, thereby exposing general limitations in perception and knowledge; the limitations also reveal the strange purposes and desires of the medium of knowledge—the mind. The need to show up the gaps in a world commonly perceived as a whole requires the creation of associations and patterns which utilise the representations whose strangeness is mitigated by normal inertia. The language of psychoanalysis, like the language of fantasy, is figurative but not conventionally metaphoric, since there is no means of tracing one's way back to original terms. (11)

Her emphasis on the fictionality of the psychoanalytical endeavour can be a healthy reminder for the literary scholar too: indeed this is what I mean when pointing out the necessity to assume also an 'emic' view as critical readers of fiction.

This present study also differs from the works of literary scholars that define the fantastic in stark opposition to 'reality' (Irwin: 1976, Rabkin: 1976), because it considers the fantastic as an explorative tool of our world, both

inward and outward.<sup>68</sup> Fantastic and hybrid fiction de-structures mechanical or automatic assumptions, setting in motion creative and divergent thought-processes, which help reframe our dispositions or gestalts and realize the conventionality of much alleged 'reality'. In this perspective it is possible to understand Frye's statement about the conservative character of much realism.<sup>69</sup> Mainstream realism relies on the likeness of the textual world to our consensus reality, whereas hybrid fiction displays its literary conventions deliberately, in order to trigger an active cognitive and affective response from the readers and show the constructs of our social conventions, rules, ideas. Thus, ultimately, hybrid and fantastic fiction can be read as a celebration of flux and an attempt at de-reification of the real.

It is, therefore, particularly apt at being read anthropologically, as a divining rod useful to detect the hidden currents of history and the 'Other' inside one's own culture. This thesis looks at some European contemporary fiction and uncovers the uncanny in a European context. Mythologization, demythologization and remythicization are fundamental processes whereby cultures live on and change. The way fantasy rewrites mythos into history sheds light on the narrative and constructed character of historical discourses too, therefore implying a processual outlook on social, natural and historical life. By emphasising 'process' over 'being', non-formulaic fantasy is potentially subversive in its play with received norms and their parody. This interaction has its roots in the power relations that the fantastic text expresses and /or subverts as a way of rejecting or upholding tradition and reacting against or at least exposing oppressive, crystallized structures, be they of an ideological or material sort.

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<sup>68</sup> W. R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: a Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>69</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: a Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 164.



### 3 Reading Fiction: Myth-Making and Ritualized Consciousness

#### 3.1 Ritualization: the Creative Process of Reading

In this chapter I argue that reading fiction is acting out a ‘ritual’, in the sense of performing a set of patterned actions, which, in the case of literature, are mental and imaginative and allow for the ritualization of the reader’s consciousness.

##### 3.1.1 *Hybrid Fictions*

The novels I have chosen are ‘hybrid fictions’, where the fantastic and performative impulse works together and against the mimetic one, in order to show the incongruity and limitations of human knowledge and perception when bound to a completely rationalistic perspective. Mimesis, with its emphasis on representation and imitation of what is tangible in the world according to a commonsensical point of view, is undermined or shown as a surface covering a vast unknown dimension. Fantasy works through parallelism to and deviation from realism in order to probe this very aspect of human experience which eludes neat classifications and rationalizations. Allegory and metaphor in these novels work as bridges between the two realms, although the abyss or rift in-between remains visible under the bridge itself. An overview of the novels cannot but be shaped by my particular concerns and positions as a reader, even while taking into account the most salient or fore-grounded episodes in the narratives.

##### 3.1.2 *The Magic of Metaphor and Symbol*

Following Catherine Bell in her endeavour to de-reify ‘ritual’ (1992), I define ritualization in the following pages as ‘the strategic manipulation of context in the act of reproducing it’.<sup>70</sup> But how does it work? What are its tools? Metaphor

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<sup>70</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 100.

and symbols are the ‘magical tools’ with suggestive and subliminal powers in hybrid fictions. In fact, in these fictions, metaphor spans two widely different worldviews. More than that, metaphor is a means of enabling human consciousness to bridge the incommensurability between the real and our own limited knowledge of it, while the unknown and the partially (un)graspable evokes in us readers a wide range of emotions which we cannot always classify neatly and explicitly. These emotions in turn manifest themselves in our body-mind continuum. While metaphor is a heuristic tool working through a redundancy of information and attributes that convey an affective and emotive quality for the recipient, it also can be subsumed in the wide web of symbolism and imagery. While there is no agreement on what a symbol is, Dan Sperber has shown that it is nonetheless possible to state a theory of symbolism in general as ‘knowledge about knowledge’ (1975), rather than follow the (post)structuralist and Lacanian idea of symbolism as a language of signs in its own right.<sup>71</sup> In fact while a language is made up of arbitrary signs that only have relational meanings, a web of knowledge, or metaknowledge, has deeper cultural implications, as it reaches the very core of what Cornelius Castoriadis calls ‘magma’, the creative imaginary, which alone is ‘real’ and at the base of whatever is.<sup>72</sup>

Metaphor, as the staple of symbolism, provides redundant information, both connotative and denotative details that work together as a surplus of sensorial knowledge affecting all the human senses and sticking in human memory. As an epistemological structure, metaphor endeavours to conceive and articulate the inconceivable, while working both on thought and emotion processes. As Ortega y Gasset said in *The Dehumanization of Art and Ideas about the Novel*:

*The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of His creatures when He made him. All our other faculties keep us within the realm of the real, of what is already there. The most we can do is to combine things or to break them up. The metaphor alone furnishes an escape; between the real things, it lets emerge imaginary reefs, a crop of floating islands. A strange thing, indeed, the existence in man of this mental activity which*

<sup>71</sup> Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, trans. by Alice L. Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>72</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity Press, [1975] 1987).

substitutes one thing for another—from an urge not so much to get at the first as to get rid of the second.<sup>73</sup>

Metaphor has usually been seen as ‘merely’ a rhetorical figure of speech, which can be more or less artificially/mechanically devised by writers and orators in order to capture the audience’s attention. Even Tambiah in his forceful revision of the logic of Trobriand magic emphasises the ordinariness of the language of metaphor, drawing attention to the fact that among Tobrianders recitation of magical spells goes hand in hand with technical work.<sup>74</sup> However, this is no endorsement for the argument of the ‘flat’ ordinariness of metaphor. Rather the opposite is true. In fact, if Trobrianders work on canoe-making while repeating mantras or chanting spells, it is because their culture codifies a space for the subliminal power of metaphor over consciousness, a power which starts from and goes beyond its ‘simple’ linguistic aspect, with powerful results. In fact while the manifest purpose of their ritual magic is to endow everyday objects with specific properties, its latent purpose is to work through suggestion in order to renew the specifics of their cultural worldview as embedded in their social institutions and to empower the people who take part in the work. Thus their magical ritual itself is a social institution which bears culture both on a collective, communitarian level and on an individual one. It facilitates the enculturation of the individual as much as it inscribes his objects into his own cultural universe of socially constituted meanings.

Metaphor as magic is embedded in a heightened but ‘natural’ state of mind or mode of consciousness, which is accessible to all human beings. It is predicated on the *emotions* evoked by contact with a certain object, whose qualities the recipient envisions and experiences in his/her body-mind continuum. This also happens in hybrid fictions where a sort of connection, participation and sharing of ‘being’ or qualities between the reader and the worlds created in the novel takes place. However, while participation takes place, there is no full identification. This happens particularly in hybrid fictions, where the fantastic and the realistic run parallel and comment on each other, as macro-metaphors that expand and feed on each other, enabling the reader to experience imaginatively an aesthetic condition of liminality. Hybrid fictions

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<sup>73</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture and Literature* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, [1925] 1968), p. 33, emphasis mine.

<sup>74</sup> Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, ‘The Magical Power of Words’, in *Culture, Thought and Social Action: an Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London : Harvard University Press, 1985).

thus constitute transitional objects (Winnicott)<sup>75</sup> that project the reader into a world-making situation, where s/he can experience a world model, the paradoxical situation of a natural simulation. According to psychologist of fiction Keith Oatley, '[...] fiction does not really imitate' because it is too 'stagey', instead:

Fiction provides context to understand the elliptical. It offers the context of characters' goals and plans. It gives a sense of how actions lead to vicissitudes. It allows, too, the reader to experience something of emotions that can arise. All of these elements are omitted from a faithful, empirically unexceptionable copy of real life.<sup>76</sup>

All the more the reader of 'hybrid' fiction knows she is having a 'lucid dream', and enjoys the experience even more for it. She experiences stylized or formalized emotions because of what can be called 'double-distancing', and because of the indeterminacy of 'hybrid' fictions, she experiences more composite emotions—whether they be baffling or positive—than when reading 'realistic' fictions.

Hybrid fictions foster the de-structuring of ingrained and limiting belief systems through the use of destabilizing metaphors, which open up a window on the workings of our own minds and emotions, as mediated through the body. Indeed, mind, body and emotion can be seen as a continuum or a network where material and immaterial factors are involved.

Rejecting Lacan's idea of an unconscious structured as a language and a consciousness predicated on a lack of 'substance', it is possible to endorse the alternative vision of a continuum of ever-shifting 'becoming', where conscious and unconscious processes communicate continuously and quickly, before we are even aware of it. While for Lacan in 'The Mirror Stage', first presented as a paper in 1936 and then published in French in 1949,<sup>77</sup> the imaginary is the illusory terrain of the ego enmeshed in mirror-reflections and a futile struggle to regain a unity which, in the first place, never existed, Castoriadis ([1975] 1987) speaks of the imaginary as the essential creative ground of all that is. If we take this idea on board, instead of considering consciousness as a reified substance

<sup>75</sup> Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>76</sup> Keith Oatley, 'Why Fiction May be Twice as True as Fact: Fiction as Cognitive and Emotional Simulation', in *Review of General Psychology* (1999), vol. 3, No. 2, p. 101-17 (here p. 108).

<sup>77</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,' in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by A. Sheridan (London: Routledge/Tavistock, [1949] 1977), pp. 1-7.

or, conversely, a lack of substance, we can view ‘it’ as a complex web of processes and relations, which are continuously shifting, expanding or shrinking, depending on different circumstances. This complex web of consciousness has both an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’, in the sense that it is diffuse and not ‘contained’ in our brains or skins only. Mind, body and emotion tie in with each other and with the surrounding environment in complex and subtle ways. This continuous, ongoing communication and exchange of information between conscious and unconscious processes happens through metaphor (and metonymy) most of the time. Anthropologist Gregory Bateson explains the cybernetic concept of ‘information’ in this way:

In fact, what we mean by information—the elementary unit of information—is *a difference which makes a difference*, and it is able to make a difference because the neural pathways along which it travels and is continually transformed are themselves provided with energy. The pathways are ready to be triggered. We may even say that the question is implicit in them. [...] The mental world—the mind—the world of information processing—is not limited by the skin.<sup>78</sup>

In hybrid fiction it is precisely the *differential* between mimesis and fantasy which carries important information for the reader’s ‘world-modeling’, the latter being a concept outlined by Oatley (2011).<sup>79</sup> While not denying the usual translation of mimesis as copying and imitation, Oatley refers to a second meaning of the word which has been forgotten throughout Western aesthetic history: ‘the idea of ‘world-simulating’ or ‘world-creating’.

[The second idea of mimesis] depends more on coherence among its elements than on correspondences between specific elements of the model and elements of the ordinary world. It works because certain relationships among things in the model world correspond to certain relationships among things in the ordinary world [...](2011:14)

On the other hand, it is the differential between mimesis and fantasy which has subversive potential, in that, when activated, it makes for a destabilization of the *status quo* and facilitates change in the reader’s perceptual gestalts.

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<sup>78</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution and Epistemology* (London: Granada, 1973), here pp. 428-29.

<sup>79</sup> Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams: the Psychology of Fiction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

### 3.1.2 Metaphor, Symbol and Emotion

Since 1980 cognitive linguists have proposed several theories of metaphor. Here I deal with the seminal ideas of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Mark Turner's extension of their theory and Gerard Steen's objections to Lakoff, referring the reader to Zoltán Kövecses for an overview of the most 'recent developments in metaphor theory'.<sup>80</sup>

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor is not a mere linguistic phenomenon, but it is conceptual in character and pervades all thought.<sup>81</sup> Thus specific metaphorical linguistic expressions are 'surface realizations' of a conceptual generalization. From this point of view, literary metaphorical expressions are still based on everyday conceptual metaphors. This theory explains the workings of conceptual metaphor in terms of cross-domain mappings: a source domain in the conceptual system is mapped onto a target domain. For example, the linguistic metaphor 'Love is a journey' has as source domain JOURNEY and as target domain LOVE. This conceptual mapping is conventional and fixed, but it can be realized in many different metaphorical expressions, such as 'our relationship has come to a dead end', or 'our relationship is not going anywhere', etc.

Mark Turner's extension and reworking of this theory suggests the phenomenon of 'conceptual integration' or 'blending' of mental spaces. According to Turner, metaphor generation and understanding are far from being uni-directional, as the source and target domains terminology implies. In Patrick Colm Hogan's succinct illustration,

[...] Turner argues that concepts may blend so that metaphors operate indirectly, in more than one direction, and negatively. Thus, in contrast with theorists who employ source/target models, Turner argues that metaphor—and, indeed, all thought—involves two or more inputs or *input spaces*, as he calls them. These input spaces *project* some properties to a *blended space*—thus the projection does not go directly from a source to a target. The resulting blend may

<sup>80</sup> See Zoltán Kövecses, 'Recent Developments in Metaphor Theory, Are the New Views Rival Ones?', *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* Vol. 9, No. 1 (2011), pp. 11-25, where he concludes that all the theories 'complement each other in a natural way' (22), and Gerard Steen's 'The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor— now New and Improved', which suggests a three-dimensional model for the study of metaphor through language, thought and communication. Both Kövecses' and Steen's papers are contained in a special issue of the *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, vol 9, no. 1 (2011), pp. 11-25, and 26-64 respectively.

<sup>81</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, Ill., London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

then project back to a particular input. That input may be then considered the target. In other cases, there is no backward projection, thus no target. In still other cases, the blend may project back to more than one input. In those cases, the blend is not unidirectional, for it may involve indirect projection from input A to input B and viceversa. Moreover, the blend is not confined to the mere combination of the projected (or, equivalently, transferred) combination itself. Finally, Turner emphasizes that blending is recursive and thus a blend may itself operate as an input to another blend.<sup>82</sup>

In his *Understanding Metaphor in Literature: an Empirical Approach* (1994), Gerard Steen objects to a strong (biological) version of Lakoff's conceptual metaphors, as stored in an individual long-term memory, and argues for their application to our cultural store of knowledge instead, because, according to his own experiments individual language users do not necessarily map linguistic metaphor onto conceptual ones automatically.<sup>83</sup> Instead, even if these conceptual metaphors may be active in one's memory, it is not really clear how they work in practice, i.e. in actual language use. Steen also argues that literature provides a context for 'metaphor online processing' that is, in reading.

These theories are the staple of contemporary research in metaphor, but, as Zoltán Kövecses underscores, they—and all the others—can only explain specific aspects of metaphor. Therefore it is desirable to integrate and consider them as different facets of the same stone. In fact, I am not sure Lakoff's and Steen's positions really need to be opposed and contrasted. While mine is not a quantitative study, it is both theoretical and empirical, and it is an attempt to establish an anthropological approach to literature and fiction reading, whereby the fundamental juncture where nature becomes self-reflexive and turns into culture can be upheld. With this I highlight that biological and cultural conceptual metaphors may be interdependent and co-developed, given that the human being is the only creature who recognizes and represents, but also fantasises about, himself.

Jung's Collective Unconscious and Rupert Sheldrake's idea of morphogenesis and biological memory are two ways to account for the same phenomenon from different but related points of view. Conceptual metaphor as

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<sup>82</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature and the Arts: a Guide for Humanists* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 107-8.

<sup>83</sup> Gerard Steen, *Understanding Metaphor in Literature: an Empirical Approach* (New York; London: Longman, 1994).

both biological and cultural adds a further layer of interpretation to (linguistic and visual) metaphor, symbolism, analogical thinking and literature.

Steen's neat division between 'reading as critical interpretation' and 'reading as everyday reception' (30) is somewhat overstated and artificial. He describes 'literary reception' as being characterised by 'subjectivity,' 'fictionality', 'polyvalence' and 'form-orientation' (34). He adds that 'in literary reading, metaphors may function as important crystallization points for the feeling of subjectivity, polyvalence, fictionality, and form-as-meaning. This is the general theoretical proposition which I will develop for empirical research' (36). However, I don't agree with his description of the characteristics of literary reading and his distinction between irrelevant 'situations' and relevant 'contexts':

For literary reading, situations are usually irrelevant. They predominantly offer 'noise' in the form of processes competing for the attention of the reader, such as a television programme or a record playing. Situations can hence interfere with the performance of the readers by distracting them from reading. Contexts are not irrelevant, because they define the reading process as literary. As a result, although I regard reading as involving an interaction between three material entities: text, reader, and situation, for literary reception, it is the context-affected interaction between text and reader which is fundamental.

At each moment of reading, readers are busy executing three analytically and empirically distinguishable types of psychological process, singly or in combination:

- (1) They have to attend to the text as a semiotic, in particular linguistic object of signification.
- (2) They have to build a conceptual representation of 'the world' it refers to in order to grasp it.
- (3) They have to accept the text as the result of an intentional, meaningful action on the part of the writer.

These processes can be designated as decoding, conceptualization, and communication, respectively. (87)

There is no need to advocate the 'death of the author' in its strong version, in order to object that the author is not necessarily aware of all of the implications and manifestations of his creative processes. He may start with a general idea in mind and then some process other than complete planning and rationalization may take charge of the micro-phases of the creation process. Moreover, the idea that 'literary reading' is impermeable to 'situations' seems to me unfounded and in contrast with the experience of reading.



Steen's main criticism of Lakoff is that 'what can be *analysed* as a linguistic metaphor in texts is not always *realized* as a conceptual metaphor— by retrieval or construction— in discourse processing' (28).

This criticism, however, only invalidates Lakoff's insight, if we argue for the conscious decoding or realization of a conceptual metaphor. My argument, instead, is in favour of a sort of subliminal entrainment in the way metaphor works, where conscious realization is not necessarily the main factor at play; hence, metaphoric images work at a much deeper level than their rationalizations and conscious explanations.

Moreover, while the quantitative methods used by Steen can be useful for the gathering of statistical data and average calculations, there are a few problems with such wide generalizations and the neat division between 'ordinary reader' and 'literary reader', or even with the general methodological framework he takes for granted. Quantitative methods cannot account for the experience of reading literature. For that a phenomenological approach is needed. Steen and others in his field take for granted the computer - brain computational analogy, where reading becomes 'online processing'. That is an epistemological metaphor I argue with, because computers do not have emotions and feelings.

Steen's criticism of Lakoff's position from within the same paradigm of cognitivism, namely that his theory can only account for the cultural dimension of metaphor, rather than the cognitive one, not only can be circumscribed, as recent studies about literary universals have shown,<sup>84</sup> but can also be seen as not irreducible, because metaphor works through suggestion.

In order to clarify this point, it is necessary to emphasise that a literary metaphor works in a peculiar way. Paul Ricoeur's essay 'Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics' (1981) is particularly helpful in this respect.<sup>85</sup> According to Ricoeur, literary metaphor has the characteristics of a narrative *in nuce*, thus we could say it is a micro-narrative or a potential narrative. Furthermore, it is an 'event', in the sense that it is enacted in reading and never loses its power, even in several readings. But what is this 'power' of the literary

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<sup>84</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>85</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

metaphor? And why not talk about metaphor in general? What is the relation between metaphor and symbol?

My definition of symbol is the following: a metaphorical condensation of diverse associations, connotations and sets of relations between them, sets which are partly culturally specific, partly universal and partly idiosyncratic to the individual. Culturally specific sets of relations are domain specific: they encode chunks of knowledge pertaining to different domains and their relevant discourses. Considering symbol in this way entails going beyond the alleged opposition between the 'old' rhetorical school (from Aristotle to Ricoeur) and the 'new' cognitive school represented by Lakoff's and others' works.<sup>86</sup>

I find it is necessary to distinguish everyday language from literary language because the latter is richer in patterning and creative metaphoricity and symbolism. In this respect, I distance myself from Gerard Steen's position and even those of Lakoff, Turner and Johnson. David Miall's arguments for 'literariness', or the distinctive character which makes literature itself and his study of neuro-psychological indicators of literariness (2007) in readers are convincing, in that they account for the fundamental capacity of literary language to surprise and elicit heightened emotions and feelings, its characteristic function of 'defamiliarization', to use a term first introduced by Russian formalist scholar Viktor Shklovsky in 1917.<sup>87</sup> Literary language (like all artistic and ritual language) is characterised by its high occurrence of patterning, which makes all the *difference* (in the sense outlined by Gregory Bateson) between itself and daily language.

It follows that, as far as literary metaphor is concerned, even the traditional linguistic distinction between dead and living metaphors is not sharp enough. In fact, even cognitive poetics, whether in the argument of mentalists such as Lakoff, or those of the culturalists like Steen and others, does not go far enough to account for the power of metaphor, a power which is reduced to mere cognition through the above mentioned theories of cross-domain mappings of source and target and of conceptual blending and other cognitive metaphor theories. On the other hand, Ricoeur's hermeneutics with its emphasis on interpretation and meaning-making, although profound, lacks a focus on the role

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<sup>86</sup> See, for example, George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: a Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>87</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in L.T. Lemon and M. J. Reis (eds. And transl.), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, [1917] 1965).

played by emotions. This lack leads us to the specific question of how a literary metaphor works, what is its ‘power’.

Here Hogan’s study of Hindu aesthetic theories helps us advance further. Indian theorists define the theory of what Oatley (2011) calls the ‘structure of suggestion’: In classical Hindu aesthetics—as defined in the Sanskrit text, the *Natyasastra* and by the prominent theorist Bharata around 2000 years ago—there are eight *Bhavas* (imitations of emotions that actors perform) and corresponding *Rasas* (the audience members’ reactions). These eight emotions are: Astonishment, Comedy, Love, Disgust, Heroism, Sadness, Fear, and Anger, while Peace was added later. According to this approach, the storyteller or writer presents the representation of the emotions, the *Bhavas*, while the readers, accordingly, experience the *Rasas*, which are not the natural emotions we experience in lived life, but rather stylized or formalized emotional responses and feelings, which can be more or less enhanced. Some commentators state that writers may blend different *Bhavas* to some extent, but should choose to play out a dominant one.

Literary metaphor works through suggestion, in that it triggers and evokes these kinds of stylised emotions in the reader. Thus, both hermeneutics and cognitive poetics need to take into account the role of emotions and feeling in literary reading, as indeed Keith Oatley (2011) and Patrick Colm Hogan (2003) have been doing in their respective fields: psychology of fiction and the study of world literatures.

What relevance has the suggestive power of metaphor for my argument of the specific characteristics of what I have called ‘hybrid fictions’ and their reading as an act of ritualization? It has enormous import.

A realistic fiction is based on the iconicity of the narrative it represents. In other words, a realistic fiction is based on the illusion of its own plausibility, in that it postulates its own transparency as an artistic form, its language also ‘poses’ as ‘self-evident’ and ‘natural’. In this way both the genre and its linguistic medium, although based on accepted conventions, hide their own conventionality. Thus, a reader of realistic fiction can more easily identify with the characters of the narrative and experience ‘catharsis’, or emotions ‘by proxy’. In the case of ‘high fantasy’, or thoroughly fantastic fictions, the conventions of realism are totally denied or reversed in an explicit manner, but in so doing they replace these conventions with new ones, which can be more or

less idiosyncratic. The point, however, is that the reader is alerted to the establishment of such conventions and demands their coherence.

The case of ‘hybrid’ fictions is different. In fact, what happens is that they prompt a process of ‘double-distancing’, in that the reader can neither identify himself fully with the character nor look for alternative ‘rules’. In other words, ‘hybrid’ fictions play with and thrive in indeterminacy and tend to stage their own fictional character, to expose their own narrative and linguistic devices, thus becoming self-reflexive and therefore performative. Here I understand ‘performativity’ as a fundamental characteristic of these texts. Even when they seem to point to some event analogous to those in the ‘outer’ world, their language is no simple index, no simple referential sign; rather, it is a web of webs made of infinite interpretants. If this is so, the symbols contained in these fictions are more explosive than those in realistic ones, because their power of suggestion is heightened by their open-ended potential for connotations and the proliferation of their interrelations. They in fact appeal to several systems of reference, rather than one only. Thus not only is the reader moved to cognitive ‘action’ but he also hesitates, is suspended in a liminal region where s/he experiences aesthetic emotions, in a way different from when s/he reads realistic fictions. Since the reader is both outside and inside the text, he feels the emotions, but cannot identify totally with the character; he empathises and yet, he experiences the distance between the two sets of clashing conventions (realistic and fantastic) as a ‘formalization’, or ‘stylization’ of the emotions triggered by symbols and metaphors: this means that his reading experience is ritualised.

Ritualization is both a formal act and a search for a content, a specific kind of experience on the reader’s part, a sort of ‘ritual vision quest’—a Native American practice which will be explained later—whose symbolical contents are capable of altering the reader’s self-concept and/or outlook on the world he inhabits. The tension between distancing irony and empathy is sustained throughout these ‘hybrid fictions’, precisely because it facilitates the ritualization of the reading experience: the reader is both inside and outside the text, interacting with it actively. In this way the text supplements magically the reader’s conception of inner and outer reality. Here my idea of magic as both a rhetorical art and a ‘natural’ (i.e. universal) mode of consciousness potentially available to every human being comes full circle: magic as a bringing to full

fruition the potentialities of human feeling, rather than as a manipulative, propagandistic (and reductive) set of (misplaced or superstitious) techniques.

In Ricoeur's lucid account, a metaphor does not exist as a word, but it is given meaning and actuality by its context (1981: 169-70). If to its semantic aspect we add an evocative dimension, metaphor is finally seen as a rounded 'phenomenon'. Not a mere rhetorical device in the sense of mechanical transposition of a word from one domain to another, but as Ricoeur says an 'interaction between semantic fields' (1981: 170), when not a blending of whole semantic fields and, I add, a *carrier of emotion*, a catalyst which sets in motion emotional energy and feelings, and therefore is truly magical in the best and most appropriate sense of the word, as it mediates a transmutation of the reader's own emotions. Thus, words are literally the material carriers of magic.

The reader enters a spatial-temporal continuum given by the time and setting of the novel, which are enacted in the so-called 'durata' (*durée*) of the reading: that is, the time involved in the reading is the time of the 'ritual' of the novel. The readers' consciousness adds a third dimension to the time and space of the novel by enacting them. The reader acts out this 'ritual', which is not only 'profane' but also existential, it has to do with the reader's experience and meaning-making as much as with the possibilities offered by the text.

The imagination is a sort of multidimensional matrix that works out different possibilities, which are inherent in the text. As a special action which, among other things, sets up a marked space, 'ritual' enables the mind to linger in the shadowy precincts of myth, which is an archetypal conglomerate of patterns that situates itself in *illo tempore*, a time of origins, of endings or of a-historical character. And yet history is not to be set up hard against myth, because history makes possible the enactment of myth, and, moreover, history as a linear progress is itself a myth which informs the modern mentality. The performative character of fiction in its interaction with the reader's mind is underscored and enhanced within the mythic-ritual framework.

Human beings make sense of the world through 'fictionalizing acts'.<sup>88</sup> For example, when talking about our day in the office, we are fictionalizing the events, of which only effects remain. The novel is a ritual space and event in continuous time. It is the very medium of experiencing another life, place and

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<sup>88</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: from Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 237.

time without negative practical side-effects. In this sense then, a novel is a 'magical' script that waits to be performed, a tool which facilitates a change in the readers' minds, when they are reading with some engagement. Fiction and the reader interact with each other, and the effects can be partly common and partly personal to different readers. Fiction can be viewed also as a specific kind of rhetorical art, which through the 'aesthetic semblance' (Iser 1989), makes the reader believe, even though s/he is aware of it being 'just' reading, and through this it performs 'magic'.

Fiction is about effecting change, be it for pleasure or for other purposes; it works with words, rhetorical devices, narrative techniques that are the tools of its performativity in the reader's mind: a mind which is necessarily embodied and not abstract, which elaborates sensations, emotions, and feelings too.

According to scientist Antonio Damasio (2000),

[...] Emotions are complicated collections of chemical and neural responses, forming a pattern; all emotions have some kind of regulatory role to play, leading in one way or another to the creation of circumstances advantageous to the organism exhibiting the phenomenon; emotions are *about* the life of an organism, its body to be precise, and their role is to assist the organism in maintaining life. [...] Notwithstanding the reality that learning and culture alter the expression of emotions and give emotions new meanings, emotions are biologically determined processes, depending on innately set brain devices, laid down by a long evolutionary history.<sup>89</sup>

[...] Emotions cannot be known to the subject having them before there is consciousness. [...] We know that we have an emotion when the sense of a feeling self is created is created in our minds. [...] But we only know that we feel an emotion when we sense that emotion is sensed as happening in our organism. (279)

After stating that 'emotional states' are defined by bodily changes, Damasio emphasizes that emotions and feelings are two distinct, but inter-dependent, phenomena:

To the simple definition of emotion as specifically caused transient change of the organism state corresponds a simple definition for feeling an emotion: it is the representation of that transient change in organism state in terms of neural patterns and ensuing images. When those images are accompanied, one instant later, by a sense of self in

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<sup>89</sup> Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens, Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 51, emphasis in the original.

the act of knowing, and when they are enhanced, they become conscious. They are, in the true sense, feelings of feelings. (282)

According to these definitions, emotions have their locus in the organism's body and feelings are conscious, and more lasting. Furthermore, they are characterised by the occurrence of images that correspond to the induced emotions. Indeed, our psychological make-up is such that a good story tells us much more than piles of rules, procedures and abstractions. A good story imprints itself on our minds and makes for the subsequent apprehension of more abstract or intangible levels of 'meaning'.

It is my persuasion that all of fiction relies on a mythical and ritual dimension far beyond the grasps of an exclusively thematic approach. And I think this holds true even when it is not directly evident. Sometimes this mythic structure is latent in the possibilities of the novel, while at other times it is consciously made explicit by the author. In either case, it is dynamic, not static. However, in the case of hybrid fiction, where the reader has to play with different conventions, the ritualization process is enhanced, as the diversity of said world-building conventions situates the reader in a peculiar cognitive and affective dimension of 'liminality', a concept I borrow from Victor Turner and explain later in the chapter.

I have chosen to work on different authors and genres, ranging from more or less fantastic to magic-realist novels, across three different linguistic areas. I proceed in this way in order to show this 'magical' dimension inherent in fiction as performative and intend to advance a processual conception of fiction, as something which is not 'out there' and cannot be reduced to 'unreality'. Rather fiction is a 'process' of reality, it is a creative processing, direct or indirect, of reality. It is its implied or evident mythic-ritual dimension which makes for its potentialities as an experiential tool. Fiction is intangible but none the less 'real' for it. Indeed each of us is a *Homo narrans* to different degrees. Fiction can be a 'rite of passage' and initiation and is always liminal and transitional.

In order to show the 'magical' dimension inherent in fiction, I point out those elements that have a mythic-ritual significance in the texts, as an active working principle that enlivens and merges structure, function and content in the texture of the narrative. I draw on anthropological theories and ideas concerning 'ritual' and 'myth' in order to unveil some of the characteristics of the novels chosen and take myth as a wide frame of reference for all of life and

fiction and the mind's workings when dealing both with fictions and the great existential questions, much in the same way anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski did. Therefore I do not subscribe to accounts that try to fit myth into a teleological framework, which is yet another product of different myths combining in order to give a certain 'progressive' perspective on life and history.

### 3.2 Why Myth and Ritual

For a very long time now, post-structuralists and de-constructionists, among whom Derrida is particularly prominent, have remarked on the 'violence of the letter' and its bad conscience in the logic of erasure that the text itself exerts on its own silent assumptions and presuppositions. Derrida has also shown how from the oppositional logic ingrained in the linear written text it is possible to detect conspicuous traces that unmask its implicit 'order' of thought and base of power. However, Derrida referred to a specific kind of text, which I have called 'linear', Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss being some of his examples: he points to texts that set up an opposition between 'culture' and 'nature' (and their subsets of oppositions), and as a consequence either romanticize or make 'nature' exotic.<sup>90</sup> He exposes, in other words, the unconscious or repressed side of human culture, its creation and objectivising of the 'Other' and the endless deferral of meaning in the text. To Derrida and his followers, all begins and ends in language, yet this theory paradoxically turns out to be a sort of linguistic mystique, in other words, yet another myth.

'Myth' is a word that has been variously used in such diverse fields as literature, anthropology, psychology, religious studies. In current usage 'myth' is considered to mean 'lie' or 'falsehood'. This is because Western culture has gone into the direction of a conspicuous demythologization of the world, our attitude being that of seeking for 'knowledge', 'meaning', the 'fact', which is the 'abstraction' behind a specific event. Yet, as all the above disciplines have shown, myth is a complex phenomenon. Scholars have been discussing the origin and function of myth and its relation to ritual and have not reached a definitive or conventional definition of this elusive phenomenon. For the purposes of the

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<sup>90</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak, corrected edn. (Baltimore, Md.; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, repr. 2001).



present research, which is about literature, I will regard myth as an archetypal process inherent in the human consciousness, unfolding as a way of experiencing life, an image-making process which accounts for and gives insight into specific, concrete experiences, be they personal, communal, related to nature or to the transpersonal domain.

I agree with Coupe (2009: 195), who sees myth as ‘imaginative exploration’, rather than ‘literal exploration’, and with Birenbaum:

A myth, then, is a symbol, in the form of a story, expressing (or producing) a confrontation between the limited perspective of the self and the unlimited context in which it exists. [...]

The single fundamental archetype (or originating form) is the structure of consciousness itself. It is thus the structure of consciousness, and not its specific contents, that myth is all about’.<sup>91</sup>

Thus myth is both a ‘process of image-making’ and an ‘image’, embodied in a ‘story’, the product of that process. Yet, as Birenbaum remarks, ‘we have only versions of the myth’ (1988: 148). Art and literature have thrived on the re-interpretation and re-writing of myths, whose origins are lost to us. What matters is how literature as a code both activates and is activated through reading by the reader’s mind, which is inherently mythic, as Jung taught about the human psyche. Lévy-Bruhl’s concept of *participation mystique* defined in *Primitive Mentality*—first published in Paris in 1922—according to which ‘primitive mind’ (that is mythical mind) blends natural and supernatural in a continuum, overriding logical concepts, is particularly suggestive.<sup>92</sup> By the same token, Cassirer’s view of myth as a constitutive ‘symbolic form’ of human consciousness is very fruitful.<sup>93</sup> Yet, in my understanding, myth is free from the latter’s evolutionist stance that relegates it to an inferior status when compared to art, religion and science. From Cassirer’s point of view, it is so because he is arguing, as a philosopher, through linear logic. However, this kind of logic is disrupted by myth, which produces an alternative logic: what Birenbaum (1988) calls ‘non-linear’ or ‘qualitative’ logic. This is something which does not

<sup>91</sup> Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 2009), Harvey Birenbaum, *Myth and Mind* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1988), pp. 113-14.

<sup>92</sup> Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1966), *The Notebooks on Primitive Mentality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), *Primitives and the Supernatural*, first published in 1931 in Paris (London: Allen & Unwin, 1936).

<sup>93</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. by Ralph Mannheim, second vol. (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 1953-1996), *Language and Myth*, trans. by Susanne K. Langer (New York; Dover, 1946).

interpret ‘fact’ but embodies a concrete experience. It is in this sense that Coupe can claim ‘the primacy of myth [...] over abstract ideas of eternal truths. Mythos produces logos’ (2009: 84). By different means, Derrida has exposed logos too.

Indeed, when I see literature as a code which both activates and is being activated by the reader’s consciousness, I am stating a principle of ‘resonance’ between the two, as myth is unfolding in the reader’s internalized space-time continuum. With this assertion I come closer to my main argument: namely, that literature is ritualized activity, both in the sense that the reader is performing and taking part in a ‘ritual’, and in the sense that different texts adumbrate specific ‘rituals’. I would like to underline how the opposition between oral and written text, and communal performance and individual reading is less rigid than usually thought or implied. In fact, a reader does not exist in a vacuum; not only is s/he part of a wider socio-cultural context, but also a web or a small community constituted by all the people who are reading, have read or will read the same book. In this respect space and time are contingent. Also, human mind and nature are not opposed, as the most recent developments in science are increasingly recognizing.<sup>94</sup> According to scientists, matter is energy, both at microscopic and macroscopic levels: space is not empty but a matrix, a field of conscious, intelligent energy, which configures itself according to different probability patterns, shaped as waves. This means that nature is consciousness, and human consciousness is contained within it. Nature is in and around us. As Birenbaum points out, ‘myth establishes an imaginative field in the mind’ (1988: 171)—and he makes clear that he intends the notion of ‘field’ in the sense used in physics: myth ‘also extends this field to include the world around, so that the three levels of reality—the myth-making mind, the community, and the realm of nature—blend into a single assertion of life’. This in literature happens, as I shall explain, through ‘ritualization’.

Let us go back to my assertion that reading literature is ritualized activity. Why? What is ‘ritual’?

If consciousness and myth are regulated according to a principle of mutual resonance, and art revitalizes and reactivates myth, this happens through

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<sup>94</sup> Ervin Laszlo, *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything* (Rochester, Vt: Inner Traditions International, 2004), *The Connectivity Hypothesis: Foundations of an Integral Science of Quantum, Cosmos, Life, and Consciousness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).

language seen as 'symbolic action'.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, according to the philosopher of language Austin (in a paper first read in French in 1958 and then translated and published in English in 1963), it is possible to perform actions with words: he refers to 'performative verbs' as those verbs that by being spoken actually act (ex. To promise something verbally is the very action of promising).<sup>96</sup> In an extended way, it is possible to state that the version of myth revitalized in a specific literary text gets enacted through and in the reader's consciousness, which is being in its turn acted upon, influenced and changed. Thus the reader herself is undergoing a 'rite of passage', a sort of initiation, parallel but not identical with that of the characters. She has to lose something in order to gain something else: from the material time necessary for the reading and her prejudices or presuppositions to greater insight or sheer, liberating enjoyment. Indeed, I would say that sacrifice plays an important part in the process of reading fiction, because fiction is a process whereby we have to create the whole situation in our minds, and in order to do so, we have both to bring our experience, or knowledge of the world to the reading process, but also try to empty our mind to some degree, in order to let the reading experience act on and through us. As Birenbaum has remarked, '[p]articularly important to the structure of myth is the logic of sacrifice, for this central ritual act conveys the continuity through mankind, nature and deity' (Birenbaum: 1988, 28). In reading literature we are bringing ourselves, in a sense sacrificing ourselves, to the experience. This does not happen in reading a newspaper article, because this relates about something in the external world, something 'given', so to speak. In literature instead, we have to co-create it all, and in so doing we engage in dialogue, negotiation and we re-instate our interest for the human world, in its interaction with the great forces of nature and mystery. Thus a sacrificial tendency is at work in myth as well as in literature conceived as ritualized activity.

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<sup>95</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1966).

<sup>96</sup> John L. Austin, 'Performative-Constative,' trans. G. J. Warnock, in C. E. Caton (ed.) *Philosophy and Ordinary Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963, 22-54). John L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (eds.) second edn (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1975).

### 3.3 Some Anthropological Theories of ‘Ritual’ and Literature

Many anthropologists agree in seeing ‘ritual’ as a set of formalized actions which have the function of re-instating the social order. There are rituals that appear to be destructive of that very order, like Southern Europe’s Carnival for example, but even that ritual’s ultimate aim is cohesive. And it seems to be so not only on the social level, but also on the intra-psychic dimension, as the partaker experiences his being ‘part’ of a ‘whole’ as having his ‘proper place’ as an individual.

The anthropological literature on ‘ritual’ (and on ‘myth’ and ‘magic’) is huge. Here are some of the most relevant definitions. According to Geertz, ‘any religious ritual [...] involves [the] symbolic fusion of ethos and world view’:

[...] For it is in ritual—that is, consecrated behaviour—that this conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated. It is in some sort of ceremonial form [...] that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another. In a ritual the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world [...]<sup>97</sup>

In ‘Symbols in African Ritual’, Victor Turner provides the following definition:

A ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests.<sup>98</sup>

However, in *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (1969), he concentrates on the structure of ‘rites of passage’ and uses the term ‘communitas’, or ‘community’ to signify an anti-structural bond between participants of the ‘ritual’. By the term ‘anti-structural’, Turner means a bond which eludes social hierarchies and structures, and even subverts them.

<sup>97</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a Cultural System’, in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books [1973], 2000), pp. 87-125, here 112-13.

<sup>98</sup> Victor W. Turner, ‘Symbols in African Ritual’, *Science* (March 16, 1972) Vol. 179, pp. 1100-05, <showme.physics.drexel.edu/thury/Myth/Turner2.html>, [accessed 3/10/2010]

‘Communitas’, a renovated sense of existential community and belonging, is always liminal and renews vision and creative processes that from the ritual context will later be brought back to the social structure, hence the creative, renewing function of ‘ritual’.

When reporting the example given by Jung about ‘the Hopi ritual dances’, Birenbaum comments on ‘the function of ritual’ as ‘[...] one of orientation, sustaining the community’s relation to the revolving world of nature, not simply as a fact but as a process of experience. Ritual is not simply magic used to control nature’ (1988: 154). In fact the natives chant *and* plant seeds: they perform ‘ritual’ as a preparation to other activities. But what sort of preparation? It is an *inner*, psychological preparation, a process of alignment to the rhythms and cycles of nature, in the specific case.

As to the formal characteristics of ‘ritual’, Stanley Tambiah defines ‘ritual’ as a performance characterized by ‘formality’, ‘stereotype’, ‘condensation’ and ‘redundancy’.<sup>99</sup>

In a similar way to the tradition of ritual magic, where ritual acts upon and is acted by consciousness, literature acts and is acted by the readers’ consciousness through the enactment of the former’s mythical elements. Fiction and poetry are different media from a painting, a film, or even a play on the stage. Although the audience is emotionally involved, theatre provides the audience with images and/or movements that are only to be perceived, not created in the observer’s mind. In this sense, they are ready-made. In theatre, in the case of experimental theatre, interaction between actors and audience is possible. The spectator gets involved either physically or through verbal response. In either case, there is a certain space for image-making but to a much greater extent do literature and myth (not only written, but also through story-telling), provide the human consciousness with the unique task of image-making, creating a setting and a life situation in the mind. And no two readers produce the same images. Moreover, while a lot has been said about the involvement of the body in ritual and its theatrical aspects, what I have called the ‘ritualized consciousness’ has not been addressed. I suggest that a specific kind of ritual consciousness is evoked in and by literature and myth, through the image-making they require of the readers.

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<sup>99</sup> Stanley J. Tambiah, ‘A Performative Approach to Ritual’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 65 (1979), pp. 112-69.

What do I mean by ‘ritualized mind’?

I mean a mind that (re)-creates and performs images (in so far as it weaves narratives out of images it is a ‘mythical mind’) in order to accomplish symbolic tasks, whose ultimate significance lies in aesthetic and/or existential insight. In order to broach this issue more cogently, it is useful to adopt Coupe’s distinction between ‘allegory’ and ‘radical typology’ (2009: 93). We could say that allegorical texts, or allegorical readings of texts, are still connected to a linear logic of univocal correspondence between the ‘letter’ and the ‘meaning’ behind it, while texts that embody a ‘radical typology’ are open to a sense of ‘permanent possibility’, an ‘ongoing dialectic of the sacred and the profane’ (Coupe 2009: 98). Thus, while allegory corresponds to ‘realism’, the spirit of ‘hierarchy’ and ‘perfection’, radical typology is linked to an apprehension of reality which is mythical, i.e. non-realist. At this point it is important to remember that it is possible to have ‘reality without realism’ (Curry, quoted in Coupe 2009: 89) and that ‘if realism is the illusion of truth, then non-realism is the truth of illusion.’ (Coupe 2009: 91)

This point is extremely relevant to my research because I am looking into contemporary texts that question to different degrees the viability of mainstream realism as a literary mode. They question its claim to truth and show how it is itself implicated in the problem of ‘representation’ as *mimesis*, and the limited logic of literalism, its search for an absolute abstract ‘meaning’ behind the changeability of the events’ patterns. This abstraction is the problem some writers are trying to address: the means of demythologization and the destruction of the imagination in mass culture.

My analytical stance rests on the presuppositions of process philosophy as expressed by Whitehead, Langer and others, namely the fundamental insight into the nature of reality as a ‘process’ rather than a ‘substance’ or ‘entity’. Everything flows, Heraclitus said first.<sup>100</sup> And contemporary science seems to confirm it. The texts I have chosen to study show directly or indirectly the limits of linear logic and/or the frustration of the characters (and the readers) who stick to it.

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<sup>100</sup> See Nicholas Reschel, *Process Metaphysics: an Introduction to Process Philosophy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

### 3.4 The Dynamics of ‘Ritualization’

In her *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, anthropologist Catherine Bell states:

The notion that ritual resolves a fundamental social contradiction can be seen as a type of myth legitimating the whole apparatus of ritual studies. [...] Ritual is not some basic mechanism for resolving or disguising conflicts fundamental to socio-cultural life. (1992: 37)

Although she does not agree with the ‘performance theory’ about their definitions of reified ‘ritual’, to her ritual is a strategic activity, a ‘way of acting’, and she speaks about the ‘ritualization of activity’ (1992: 219).

Indeed ritualization is the strategic manipulation of ‘context’ in the very act of reproducing it. [...] ritualization cannot be understood apart from the immediate situation, which is being reproduced in a misrecognized and transformed way through the production of ritualized agents. (1992: 100)

The above statement can be applied also to the reading of literature. In fact, together with invariance of its elements, a ritual cannot be performed exactly in the same way all the time: even small changes in setting, situation, etc., can alter the effective significance and impact of the ‘ritual’ for the individual participants. In a similar way, a fictional text is a script that generates a great number of potential readings. If the dichotomy between ‘thought and action’ has to be demystified—as Catherine Bell argues—then reading literature is an open-ended *process*, which generates multifarious meanings and possibilities of meanings which resonate, through the archetypal configuration of the individual’s psyche, with the indefinite character of mythological elements present in the text. These elements are indefinite from the point of view of ‘meaning’, hence multi-vocal, yet they embody an experience, a concrete apprehension of the world through images, feelings, sensations.

In this sense, a fictional text can be seen as a ‘magical script’ whose ‘meaning’ is not absolute and given once and for all but that needs to be activated and also activates different aspects in different readers’ consciousness. The main point of Catherine Bell’s book is that there is not such a thing as ‘ritual’ ‘out there’, but that instead ‘ritualization’, as a specific way of marking off certain activities from others, is ‘a strategic way of acting in specific

social situations' (67) and this is what anthropology, according to her, should be observing. As far as the study of literature is concerned, reading is such a ritualized activity. This is not only obvious in institutionalized contexts in which certain texts are upheld as allegedly expressing certain ideal values. On another level, it is also obvious in the way people share and dip into popular texts of literature (external ritualization). However there is another level where reading a text can be seen as a ritualized activity': when somebody is reading by herself (internal ritualization).

In this case the individual reader is engaging in an activity which is well marked off from more mundane ones, and it has strong implications for negotiating her own identity, knowledge and spaces of freedom within social constraints: reading happens in a social context; no matter how isolated a reader is, s/he is still making a performative statement of her own position, situating herself and being situated within a social dimension.

While Catherine Bell rejects symbolic and cultural interpretations of 'ritual' such as Geertz's, Turner's and Tambiah's as not being capable of resolving the antinomy between thought and action, she does so because she is concerned with the study of social actions. She states that these anthropologists are inscribing into the object of their study—the social actors—the method of theoretical speculation that they are employing: 'the object and the method are actually intrinsic to each other, one demonstrating the naturalness and validity of the other' (1992: 49). Yet, I am not convinced that this is 'wrong', as we all approach reality through our own frame of reference, and she does so by mentioning 'practice' rather than 'performance', or 'text'.

However, since the object of my reflection is literature, and I see it as a 'social activity' too, I intend to build on the asymmetrical relationship between language and 'ritual'. As Bell herself states, '[w]hereas the use of language or a particular mode of speaking does not appear to be intrinsically necessary to ritual as such, the opposite holds—namely, that ritualization readily affects the way language is used and the significance it is accorded' (Bell 1992:113). While some theorists, starting from Ricoeur, have seen meaningful action as a text, I see a text as a 'magical script' which engenders a *process*, indeed *becomes* a process, a specific kind of unfolding activity in the reader's consciousness. Thus, while I subscribe to Bell's view that there is no such thing as 'ritual' in the sense of a specific 'object' of observation, but only as a practice or, from my point of



view, as an action continuum which is more than the sum of its single elements and sequences, I am convinced that we perform ritual *activity* when reading. In this way, the term ritual is an adjective qualifying different actions, as embodying a certain quality of consciousness, which I have called ‘ritualized’ and describe in more detail in the sections 3.6 and 3.7 below.

Bell explicitly says that she has not intended to offer another ‘theory of ritual’, as the afore-mentioned anthropologists have done. But to be fair to them, although they have somewhat reified ‘ritual’, they have also pointed out the ambivalence of ‘ritual’ as a set of actions and its potential for power negotiation within the limits of social constraints. For my part, I believe that Bell’s insights can be enhanced by adopting some of Turner and Tambiah’s views on ‘liminality’, ‘communitas’ and ‘magic’, views which are fruitful for reading literature too.

### 3.5 Reading and Socialization

Here is Victor Turner’s definition of ‘communitas’ and ‘liminality’ in some detail:

For me *communitas* emerges where social structure is not. [...] For *communitas* has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men. Structure, on the other hand, has cognitive quality, it is essentially a set of classifications, a model for thinking about culture and nature and ordering one’s public life. *Communitas* has also an aspect of *potentiality*, it is often in the subjunctive mode. Relations between total beings are generative of symbols and metaphors and comparisons; art and religion are their products rather than legal and political structures. [...] Prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people. [...] Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are frequently generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man’s relationship to society, nature and culture. *But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as thought. Each of these productions has a multivocal character, having many meanings, and each is capable of moving people at many psychobiological levels simultaneously.* (1966: 126-29, emphasis mine)

Reading—alone or together—is an act of socialization and identity building. It can reinforce the sense of belonging—through *communitas* and liminality—to a specific group. Even when we are rejecting this sense of

belonging, we are defining ourselves in the context of a wider social dimension. We cannot get away from this base: a sense of self and a sense of belonging are interdependent and relational. And the extent to which a reading empowers or dis-empowers us is a function of its potential for power renegotiation and creativity.

When a text is radical-typological, it goes beyond the literalist search for the only 'meaning' and its corollary, the opposition between thought and action (and the devaluation of the latter). The possible readings of this text are embodied experiences, with potentialities for meaning, patterns that will be more or less evident and actualized with each reading and each individual reader. When instead allegory is at work in a text, our possibilities for reading are in some ways precluded. Reading is action. Thought is action too: their ultimate separation may be a matter of linguistic categories (and maybe there are languages that do not oppose the two?)

Reading as a process is grounded in bodily experience, because our ability of image-making is mediated by bodily experience from which 'the ungraspable forms of imagination [which] profoundly affect human reasoning' emerge (Bell 1992: 95); and, I would add, these same forms of imagination affect human feelings too. I mean that reading (re)-evokes certain feelings, because we experience them in the body or, better still, in our body-consciousness continuum. As Bell puts it, 'the body 'mediates' all action' (1992: 97).

### 3.6 The Reader and the Text

As already pointed out, when I state that fiction reading is a process of ritualization, I have in mind that the reader acts out a 'rite de passage', and finds himself in a liminal situation. It is in a way a 'ritual' of initiation which makes for the de-structuring or reinforcing of the configuration of the self, from a rigid 'structure' or something which is perceived to be so, to a conglomerate of processes. In this interaction, the reciprocal resistance of both reader and text has to be taken into account, as well as the potential for their creative 'positive' action as opposed to 'negating' action. For example, in *Lanark*, the consulting of the oracle lays bare Lanark's life as Thaw, but the very nature of the oracle as depicted in the story exposes a certain view of the omniscient narrator as an abstraction. This in turn has different effects on different

readers: they may find it reassuring or they may resist this narrative device. In either case, they are obliged to follow the oracle's account as authoritative (up to a point, but I will return to *Lanark* in due course), while acknowledging the artificiality of its omniscient voice. In this process, the readers may experience cognitive dissonance or accept the provisional, transient nature of the 'ritual' they are undergoing. This ritualization may be, among other things, therapeutic, in that the reader's self is released from over-logical, literal constraints. I mean that this ritualization has no pre-emptive 'meaning' but generates different 'meanings', and as such can be both a locus of resistance and innovation. I do not see ritualization as invariably conservative, although it is cohesive, in the sense that it allows for a certain degree of reconfiguration of power patterns within the limits of certain given constraints. These constraints are given by different texts, which together with being a magical script or code to be acted out and on, are also a 'controlled environment'. Thus there are many possible readings of a text, but some are more 'appropriate' than others, according to the features of the single texts.

There is yet another way in which ritualization shapes the embodied consciousness of the reader: by an act of 'modelling' through the textual strategy of the 'implied reader', as defined by Wolfgang Iser (1978). The reader comes to the text with certain expectations. Whether these are met or baffled determines a point of friction between the reader's projections and the resistant intentionality expressed in/by the text. On the other hand, as Iser has shown, a text constitutes and requires an 'implicit reader', who may or may not coincide with the actual, embodied reader. It can remain an 'ideal' the text is striving or tending towards, or can be incarnated in the present reader. However, this characteristic of the text, the presence of the 'implied reader', requires that each reader fulfils, at least in part, the criteria set out by the text, if an 'appropriate' reading is to unfold. The reader has to perform certain tasks encoded in the text. But there is more than one appropriate reading. In this sense, consciousness ritualization happens as that process which organizes a field of interacting forces within which resistance and compliance take shape. Thus ritualization offers a certain space for negotiation, strategy and innovation.

Since (*not* despite) the 'implied reader' is strategic to the text's intentionality, the embodied reader has some options: to comply with or oppose it, to differentiate herself from it in part or *in toto*, and to question its function

and status (critical reading), and provide alternative readings (divergent or creative reading). For example, in *Lanark* the author says in the 'Epilogue' he has written a story which should be read in the way it is laid out but should be thought about in a different order; but what if a reader decides to defy this instruction? And is this not a trick or a trap, after all, given that the author decided to lay the story out the way he did? It is this ambiguity which adds depth to the reading process.

### 3.7 The Role of Ritualization in Literature

Catherine Bell dissociates rituals from beliefs:

Ritualized activities specifically do not promote belief or conviction. On the contrary, ritualized practices afford a great diversity of interpretation in exchange for little more than consent to the form of the activities. [...] It is exactly this sort of formal and thereby noncommittal participation that ritualized practices do allow. (1992: 186)

From her point of view, 'ritual [as a practice rather than as an entity] is the thing itself. It *is* power; it acts and it activates'. (1992: 195) Reading literature as a ritualized activity would entail recognizing both its potential for self-empowerment and the dynamics of power and resistance between the reader and the text. If 'ritual symbols and meanings are too indeterminate and their schemes too flexible to lend themselves to any simple process of instilling fixed ideas' (1992: 221), it follows that in reading literature in this way, the ambiguity and the power-balancing process of ritualizing mark it off as a special activity.

Wolfgang Iser talks about 'fictionalizing acts' as 'operations' (1989: 237) and distinguishes 'the fictive', 'the imaginary' and 'meaning'. 'The fictive' is conceived as 'an act of boundary-crossing', an 'overstepping' of the world, which is nonetheless incorporated in the background of a fiction; 'meaning' is the properly semantic, plurivocal and existential element of fiction, while the imaginary is difficult to define:

The imaginary is not semantic, because it is by its very nature diffuse, whereas meaning becomes meaning through its precision. It is the diffuseness of the imaginary that enables it to be transformed into so many different *gestalts*, and this transformation is necessary whenever this potential is tapped for utilization. Indeed fiction, in the

broadest sense of the term, is the pragmatically conditioned gestalt of the imaginary [...] Fiction reveals itself as a product of the imaginary insofar as it lays bare its fictionality, and yet it appears to be a halfway house between the imaginary and the real. It shares with the real the determinateness of its form, and with the imaginary its nature of an 'As if'. (1989: 232)

In this interpretation, 'the fictive' is not literature by itself, but is what makes literature possible. The fictive is the process whereby humans make sense of reality, yet literature is special in that it makes the readers aware of its fictionality. In doing so, it provides a specific gestalt for the imaginary, what other authors throughout history have called 'imagination', 'fancy', or 'fantasy'. Iser is not interested in saying what the imaginary is, but how it works in literature, and recognizes it is inherently 'diffuse' and elusive. He also talks about 'the play of the text' (1989: 249) and asks why we need to play.

I suggest that playing the textual game is an act of ritualization, in the sense proposed by Catherine Bell in the quotations I have cited, where ritual acts are dissociated from beliefs and promote a certain degree of self-empowerment within the constraints of the text set by the author's intentionality. Thus, I would say that reading literature as ritualization it is a strategic play of power, domination and resistance in the reader's embodied consciousness. Only external adherence to the form of the text is required in order for coherent, multiple interpretations to be constructed or played out in the reader's mind. Also, ritualization, intended in the sense outlined so far, is an act which is different but not opposed to that of fictionalization. The latter produces 'meaning', the first is a threshold to the imaginary. This is so because the imaginary, the act of imagination as creative shaping faculty, is a search for (self)-enhancement, whereby the consciousness experiences itself at its most heightened state and meanwhile knows its potentialities.

Now, ritualization, as an act of power, formalizes that which is beyond the various worldviews (gestalts, frames of reference), what Iser calls the 'ungraspable'. This means that ritualization does not explain anything, nor is it tied to specific beliefs, but is a patterning action which performs according to a gestural principle. It is 'expressive' in a gestural sense, rather than conveying 'meaning'. And it is through this gestural principle of 'modelling' that ritualization approaches the 'ungraspable', as a formalized practice of power

which plays out the psyche's potential for enhancement of its faculties and its environment.

Thus ritualization tells us something about our make-up as human beings - and in this sense I am going further down the direction pointed out by Iser. Ritualization tells us something about the imagination as an act of free play and creativity, but cannot solve the unsolvable problem of its origins. Yet ritualization is important because it both structures and de-structures the reader's consciousness through glimpses of the inarticulate 'imaginary'. Ritualization is an activity which integrates reader and text in the same dynamic process; it is an alternative to 'play' but also encompasses it. Indeed it is a better explanatory tool than 'play' because it recognizes both the formalization of rules and the free play inherent within the constraints provided by the rules *and also* the balancing of power between reader and text. Thus ritualization is itself a reading process: people 'see' or construct certain rules in order to 'play', to make sense and empower themselves. These reading 'rules' are the basics for making sense of fiction: the reader engages in a peculiar pattern of action in order to 'win' something, to find the unique contribution he can give as a reader and engage in a conversation with himself and with the author.

If 'play' is directed to gaining or winning something, however, it follows that there must be a winner as well as a loser. In ritualized games, instead, there's a balancing out of power and formalization of practices which involve staging the appropriate response, so that there is a distance between the player and the play, and simultaneously an identification of the player with his role. In reading, this special aspect is given by the threshold, or boundary-crossing, stepping into 'another world' that in turn oversteps and reveals some aspects of the real world, according to the principles of 'selection' of certain features of 'outer' reality and their 'combination' within the text, as outlined by Iser when speaking about the nature of 'fictionalizing acts'.<sup>101</sup>

Can ritualization be specific to art and spirituality more than the fictive? We perform 'fictionalizing acts' all the time in everyday life, yet we do not mark off all these activities as special. Literature has this distinctive feature in that it places us, as readers, in a liminal dimension, in the 'beyond' of the literary text, where we live emotions, experiment situations, feelings and thoughts which

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<sup>101</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore, Md.; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 4-21.

affect us ‘on many psychobiological levels simultaneously’ (Turner 1969: 129). I would add that ‘the fictive’ follows ritualization. Only when ‘fictionalizing acts’ are produced within a ritualized framework, are we dealing with a literary text (oral or written); otherwise we have other phenomena. I suggest therefore that the interplay of the fictive and the imaginary is not enough to account for literature, as it occurs also in other daily activities without bringing about literature.

So far, then, I have been suggesting that by entering the game/play of the text, our embodied consciousness is performing a ritualized activity, because of the following factors: liminality, self-empowerment, identity-building and social/communal positioning effected through the reading act, performativity. Literature indeed plays games with and on the reader but in a ritualized way brings about a relationship between reader and text (with its characters, heroes and heroines). However, the reader never loses in the practical sense of the world, but always gains some insight and extends herself. She, however, is performing a ‘self-sacrifice’, which will bring about greater gain. Each individual reading is a creative enactment of the literary script and entails accepting a ‘make-believe’ scenario, a simulation whereby the reader removes himself from what Iser calls his own ‘disposition’ and enters in another’s shoes. It is only partial identification though, because the reader at the same time distances himself both from what he is reading and his world, and is present in an in-between condition. In this sense, reading is based on conventionality and distancing.

The ‘player’ simultaneously becomes the ‘play’ and the ‘played’, in that by stepping out of herself in the reading, the reader momentarily puts *in the background* what she is, in order to be something other in three movements: she is one with the text, she is played by the text in that the text brings out new configuration of the reader’s experience of herself, and she negotiates power ‘positions’ with and in the text (both receptiveness and resistance have to be taken into account). These movements are not a pre-ordained sequence, but can occur at any time, even simultaneously. Ritualized reading involves the setting up of a space between the reader (with her disposition) and the text (with its dynamic requirements). In this space both identification and distancing take place. In this ‘ritual space’ of the text’s enactment, the reader learns the appropriate response through this double movement of identification and

distancing. This is what makes different 'meanings' possible, in that the reader's imagination is involved at different levels: through the double movement of performing the text and being performed by the text, the reader is drawn into several emotional trasmutations and metamorphoses. In other words, 'magic' happens.



## 4 Chapter 4: Magic and Performativity

In this chapter I outline the relation between the theoretical construct of ‘magic’ and modernity. Following Styers (2004), I am going to show briefly how since the beginning of the modern age the much debated category of ‘magic’ has served as a foil for a clear-cut demarcation of the secular realm of politics and science on one hand and of that of institutionalized religion on the other, which have indeed ended up reinforcing each other in delimiting their respective domains of influence. After drawing distinctions among different ‘kinds’ of magic (supernatural or ‘real’ magic, natural magic, secular magic, fetishism and magic as a rhetorical art), I apply ‘magic’ to literature. Finally, I explore Kenneth Burke’s ideas on literature as symbolic action and ‘magic’ as the very basis of language, and expand my reflections with the support of linguistics, in order to pinpoint a performative conception of fiction.

### 4.1 Magic and Modernity

In his compelling analysis of Western theories of magic, Randall Styers (2004), shows how ‘magic’ as a reified concept has served a number of purposes since the emerging out of the distinctive institutions of the secular capitalist West: the ‘state’, the ‘market’, ‘religion’ and ‘science’. In their numerous attempts to define ‘magic’ as something other than ‘religion’, scholars have tried to define the latter as a spiritualized and disembodied practice which can be easily set apart from more pragmatic concerns and practices. In David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* (1757) for example, religion is a universal phenomenon and a matter of ideas and beliefs which can be assented to rationally and inwardly. This apparently transparent and reasonable definition of religion, however, masks more than it reveals, as it is based on the culturally specific presupposition which has shaped Western history, from the Jewish distinction between ‘true’ religion and ‘false’ idolatry, to the Greek differentiation between ‘religion’ and ‘science’, ‘mythos’ and ‘logos’. In-between there is ‘magic’, a sort of buffer between the two domains, which nicely mutually exclude one another and let the other live according to its own specific interests and concerns. And of course, Hume’s and subsequent ideas concerning religion also bear the brunt of Post-Reformation rationality and

religiosity, often eager to define itself in contrast to the ‘magical’ practices of that big Other, Catholicism. Thus this highly abstract concept of religion can live side to side and indeed support liberal thought, capitalism, the ethics of the state, and rigorous empirical research into an increasingly inanimate matter. ‘Magic’ is the grey area of dissent, of un-policed desire, of deviance and refusal to be ‘modern’. From Frazer’s conception of magic as ‘bastard sister of science’ onwards, in anthropology as well as in religious studies, scholars have been concerned with setting boundaries and containing ‘magic’ as the domain of the radically and inconceivably Other, whereby the West, the State, the Market can take shape by the logic of differentiation and opposition. Abstract religion is also an accomplice to this process, in that it is content with reclaiming the private conscience of the subject, while shaping it in compliance with social norms. In addition, the moment that the boundaries between human and non-human are set hard against each other, ‘magic’ with its blurred categories becomes that obdurate irrational practice that denies order, hierarchy and opposes the logic of rationalization and efficiency, the very base of ‘modernity’.

Recently, discourses on ‘magic’ have been appropriated by anthropologists (for example Michael Taussig<sup>102</sup>) and activists alike, in order to show their subversive potential in the context of (post)colonial cultures. On the other hand, in the West, there has been an ongoing sense of how, as an underground practice, magic serves to de-structure consciousness and compliance to power constraints. Thus, pagan activist Starhawk<sup>103</sup> has been able to state:

*Magic* is another word that makes people uneasy, so I use it deliberately, because the words we are comfortable with, the words that sound acceptable, rational, scientific, and intellectually correct, are comfortable precisely because they are the language of estrangement. (1982: 13. Emphasis in original)

Beyond the flagrant provocation, I am quoting a pagan feminist as a marker of the peculiar enterprise I have set out to attempt: that of an ‘anthropologizing of the West’ through the reading of literature and the reading of literature as an invariably anthropological concern. Thus quoting somebody who is beyond the

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<sup>102</sup> Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). And Taussig, *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>103</sup> Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982).

establishment is a declaration of intent and a way to rethink and re-appropriate 'magic' for literary discourse, as a fluid tool, not a reified category used to police the limits and boundaries of the acceptable and the 'norm'.

In the previous chapter I have stated that to read consists of undergoing a ritual, hence reading sets up a marked off space and time where a magical experience can take shape. The text is the tool *and locus* of enactment of this magic, and insofar as it is something to be *acted*, a script to be performed, it is fully wrapped up in the concept of performativity. It is my contention that magic is very much at the heart of the 'modern' enterprise, however we try to dismiss and mask it. Literature is a kind of magic: that kind that tries to affect a change in consciousness through an *as if*. Thus, I am not conceiving magic as a domain of 'pure' desire and instant gratification, rather as a discipline and a practice which is murky, 'contaminated', but not in the negative sense propounded by early theorists of magic. Rather, it is contaminated in the sense that it entails a rethinking of the modes of subjectivity and of the interactions between the subject and its environment, a hands-on approach to knowledge, cognition, imagination and action.

As 'modern' citizens, we are not so different from 'traditional' peoples: we have only shifted our attention and refined our magical practices. Only, at a certain point, our desire for self-legitimization and power has turned into 'the language of estrangement' and domination. It is for this reason, I believe, that unearthing the magic inherent in literature is important: to show that literature is a magical supplement to reality, that it is important because it is 'parasitic' on 'serious' language. This, however, does not mean that, by implication, I am still advocating a bankrupt ontology of Presence or a metaphysical endowment of Being; on the contrary, I am basing my assessment on a vision of flux and change as the only basis for reality. To debunk 'seriousness' and to advocate 'playfulness' means nothing less than expose the gravity and pompous self-importance of much cultural discourse; it is to believe that literature can get us in touch with the power of the imagination and creativity, as practices which go against the received wisdom of reification, compliance and conformity.

## 4.2 Supernatural, Secular Magic and Fetishism

Simon During (2002) distinguishes among supernatural, natural, folk and secular magic.<sup>104</sup> From his point of view, the latter is at the very core of the modern enterprise, with its emphasis on gratification, illusionism, commercialism and triviality. He states that secular magic is a hollow and deliberate doubling of 'real' or high magic, that is supernatural and natural magic. While folk magic with its beliefs is to be confined to the realm of popular superstition and healing, natural magic is concerned with nature and the levels of causation possible within natural laws. Supernatural magic, on the other hand, is concerned with spiritual or invisible causes, but can blend into natural magic depending on the conceptualization of causal agents such as angels and demons, as belonging to 'nature' or to 'supernature'. The different types of high magic include alchemy, the Jewish Kabbalah and astrology, just to mention a few. Indeed, many heterodox systems of knowledge devised by learned magic practitioners belong to this class.

For our purposes the distinction between '(super)natural' and 'secular' magic is particularly fruitful and important, as it can be applied to the broad concerns of various types of literature. According to During, 'a literary equivalent to secular magic does exist, and [...] it can be found in writing which solicits the heterogeneous modes of reception that characterize the magic assemblage'. (178-79) His definition of the latter is the following:

By 'magic assemblage' I mean that motley of shows in the public spaces where magic was performed: theatres, fairs, streets, taverns and so on. Magic assemblages are defined less by virtue of any formal or abstract features that they have in common than by their contiguity to one another in day-to-day commercial show business. At one time or the other, the magic assemblage included optical illusions like magic lantern shows or early film, feats of strength, juggling, posture mastery, ventriloquism, puppet shows, trained animal exhibitions, comic routines, automata displays, lotteries, and joy rides. It names, in other words, a historically developing sector of leisure enterprises which began to consolidate during the seventeenth century, at first alongside traditional and ritual festivals and revelries. [...] The amusements and pleasures of conjuring are at once so powerful and so slight that they escape even carnivalization, for they work more on the mind than on the body. Because the doubleness and

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<sup>104</sup> Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

elusiveness of conjuring constitute its core, the magic assemblage twists and turns in its orientation to the wider culture. (66-7)

Thus, its 'literary equivalent' 'is exemplified in fictions which undercut and strain literature's spiritual mission (and often the 'suspension of disbelief') by deploying both tricks and effects. At one level, all fictions use tricks and aim at effects, but only some of them use the same sort of tricks and effects as secular magic. Those are the kind that eschew ethical or spiritual gravity and are principally based on surprising techniques designed to intensify various readerly reactions' (179). During mentions Edgar Allan Poe and E.T.A. Hoffmann as exemplary writers of this kind of fiction.

Likewise, I think that there is enough evidence in literature of a sort of '(super)natural' magic, whenever a fiction tries to overcome given epistemological constraints and to reach beyond the reified 'real', the commonsense, the assumption that the world out there can be trivially reduced to a set of known laws and rules valid in all circumstances. In this kind of literature the tension between 'playfulness' and 'seriousness' is of paramount importance: the engendered irony is a carrier of an ethical stance or quest, a tool for the exploration of the incommensurably (hyper-)real. As an example of this kind of fiction I would mention *Wuthering Heights*. Whereas secular magic does not conceal its being based on illusionism, but rather displays it, supernatural magic rests on the presupposition of the full pregnancy of its practices and of the nameless phenomena it tries to unveil or at least to hint at. The same distinction I see as relevant to literature.

In the discourse on the 'sublime' and the 'fantastic', the emphasis has always been on the inexpressible, the ineffable other side of things and the effort to articulate it. 'Magic', both secular and (super)natural, illusionist or serious, while polymorphous and flexible, is an interpretive tool at once more precise and open-ended. It defies and de-structures the rigid logic of binary oppositions, and it makes for the co-existence of apparently contradictory conditions. This is what happens technically and stylistically in much contemporary fiction, where multiple and contradictory narratives are mounted upon or against each other, and thus made to resonate in the reader's mind. These works not only investigate the status of reality but also the process of the creative imagination *per se*.

While in the first instance, that of fiction which is equivalent to secular magic, illusionistic devices convey the sense of their artificiality and constructedness, and elicit sensational responses and guilty pleasures, in the case of fiction equivalent to (super)natural magic, the words are romantically endowed with power which can affect and change consciousness. This fiction can be understood better if we think of magic as a ‘rhetorical art’. William A. Covino (1992) states:

Magic is not the instant and a-rhetorical product of an otherworldly incantation; it is the *process* of inducing belief and creating community with reference to the dynamics of a rhetorical situation. Magic is a social act whose medium is persuasive discourse, and so it must entail the complexities of social interaction, invention, communication, and composition. (para. 2 of 21)

He points out that the rise of current ‘plain rhetoric’ that mesmerizes audiences with its seeming clarity and simplicity [...] coincides with the destruction and disappearance of the magical consciousness that makes participatory, exploratory, generative rhetoric possible’ (para. 3 of 21). Now, literature that is worth the name consciously tries to subvert and rework ‘plain rhetoric’, in order to open up onto the realm of the imaginary, with its potential for envisioning change and alternatives to the given. Literature too goes through ‘the complexities of social interaction, invention, communication, and composition’: not only is reading, as I have already stated, a social, or communal act, but also making literature entails positioning oneself within or without a certain socio-cultural context. Covino talks of ‘inducing belief’ as the staple of magic.<sup>105</sup> However, from my point of view, this is not the only pivotal element, both in magic and literature: it is the re-structuring and change of consciousness, through the imagination, which is of paramount importance too.

Secular and high magic can also blend with each other to some degree, as the secular always doubles the (super)natural, pre-emptying it of its force and virtue. Secular magic fiction is a sort of machine, producing doubles, automata, and artificial ghosts. The other, in its most distilled form, smashes the machine, and opens onto the cosmos. Although it may seem that I am giving value judgements, I am not: rather, I am trying to convey what I see as an ongoing

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<sup>105</sup> William A. Covino, ‘Magic and/as Rhetoric: Outlines of a History of Phantasy’, *Jac*, Volume 12.2 (Winter 1992), [http://www.jacweb.org/Archived\\_volumes/Text\\_articles/V12\\_I2\\_Covino.htm](http://www.jacweb.org/Archived_volumes/Text_articles/V12_I2_Covino.htm), [accessed 26 August 2010].

tension between the requirements of the literary market and those of literary art, between the necessity to accept the given before recasting it, and the urge to explore and de-essentialize reality.

At the juncture between supernatural and secular magic, I would place the phenomenon of fetishism. The fetish is an object endowed with power or *mana*, something that is usually inanimate takes on life because of the particular investments of energy and intent that its worshippers attribute to it. Moreover the properties of its parts add on one another, but their sum is more powerful than the parts themselves. In the worshippers' mind, the fetish is a *locus* of special agency or a catalyst. Something that is man-made, and thus an object, becomes more than itself. In modern society, fetishes are everywhere. Money itself is our foremost fetish. 'The State', for example, is an abstract entity made up of individuals and institutions, which is endowed with strong evocative power through the rhetorics of national authority. Likewise, piecemeal objects, endowed with mystical power, transmute themselves into abstractions. For example, such is the case of saints' relics, which, by metonymy, take on miracle-working powers, or, in a more secular perspective, ipods could be considered as fetishes too.<sup>106</sup> In this sense, the fetish is both hollow and over-full, empty and over-brimming with its capacity for signification and unsettlement.

Literature too can unveil the uncanny fascination with the fetish in modern society, as I will show in my readings of the novels. The historical contingency of the fetish becomes opaque, while a sort of daily mystique seems to point to a dimension of unchanging properties. Yet, at the same time, literature that deals with fetishism unmasks this apparent contrivance in order to show the deep historicity of the fetish. Analyzing literature as a discourse on fetishism sheds some light on the mechanics of modern culture and society, while also penetrating in the domain of the collective imaginary and its individual manifestations. Fiction that shows, through dystopia or deformation, the mystical qualities of abstract entities turned into 'bodies' traces a sort of genealogy of the culture that has produced it.

So far I have been highlighting those characteristics of magic which can be extended to literature, in the attempt to show how this flexible practice, magic,

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<sup>106</sup> I owe this observation about ipods to my supervisor Dr Laura Martin

is symbolic action, in the same sense that literary language is, as advocated by Kenneth Burke in his *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, first published in 1941.<sup>107</sup>

### 4.3 Literature as Symbolic Action and Magical Enactment of Language

In a perceptive passage from the afore-mentioned work, Kenneth Burke states:

The magical decree is implicit in all language; for the mere act of naming an object or situation decrees that it is to be singled out as such-and-such rather than something other. Hence, I think that an attempt to *eliminate* magic, in this sense, would involve us in the elimination of vocabulary itself as a way of sizing up reality. Rather, what we may need is *correct* magic, magic whose decrees about the naming of real situations is the closest possible approximation to the situation named [...]. The choice here is not a choice between magic and not magic, but a choice between magics that vary in their degree of approximation to the truth. (1973: 4-6, italics in the original)

These different types of magic are, indeed, linguistic in character and are part and parcel of the distinctions that I have tried to define for the purpose of re-conceptualizing literature. It goes without saying that once we trespass outside the narrow circle of light of rationalist discourse and mimetic bias, a whole new uncharted realm lies before us. For one thing, the construction of the ‘fantastic’ as a reversal of rationalist laws appears to be a straitjacket; the same goes for ‘magical realism’ intended as a blend of ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ narratives, or ‘fantastic’ and ‘realistic’ elements. More importantly, the dimension of literary language as a specific kind of symbolic action comes to the forefront. Burke defines the ‘poet’ (the writer) as a ‘medicine man’ (1973: 64) and enumerates three magical aspects of the poetic act which characterize a literary work:

Dream (the unconscious or subconscious factors in a poem—the factor slighted by the Aristotelians [...]), prayer (the communicative functions of a poem, which leads us into the many considerations of form, since the poet’s inducements can lead us to participate in his poem in so far as his work has public, or communicative structure—the factor slighted by the various expressionistic doctrines, the Art for Art’s Sake school stressing the work solely as the poet’s

<sup>107</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd edn (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1973).



externalizing of himself, or naming of his own peculiar number), chart (the realistic sizing-up of situations that is sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, in poetic strategies - the factor that Richards and the psychoanalysts have slighted). (1973: 5-6)

Dream, prayer and chart, in Burke's terminology point to the multidimensionality of the literary work, where the mimetic function is just one of its various shaping factors. The imaginary and the communicative also interweave with the mimetic rendering or, better, the indexical pointing of the literary script to a specific situation in the real world. The function of literary magic is thus an 'approximation to the truth', its partial disclosure and the exposure of what is fake. Literature as secular magic, by enhancing and stressing its own artificiality, points to the uncanny conventionality of our rules. Literature as (super)natural magic adopts another strategy, that of trying to get nearer and nearer to some kind of existential truth, elaborated on the basis of a reworking and recasting of experience through reflection and imagination. Both express dissatisfaction, although in more or less playful ways, and make a diagnosis of the *status quo*.

Referring back to the notion of 'radical typology' as defined by Laurence Coupe (2009) and described in a previous chapter of this dissertation, I suggest that literature that refuses to be just mimetic (indeed the greatest part) is bound to enact itself as magical. This is so for all those literary works which go beyond flat, one-to-one allegory, not just those overtly 'fantastical'. The literary text can be conceived as a performance, a magical script being enacted and taking on flesh according to the workings of the imagination, which fills the gaps left in the text itself. These reflections lead us to the concept of performativity.

## 4.4 Language and Text: Performativity, Metaphors, Metonymy and Magic

The first to advocate a performative concept of language was the analytical philosopher Austin,<sup>108</sup> who stated that indeed to speak is to act:

Once we realize that what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech-situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act. (1975: 139)

Austin had started (1963) by distinguishing between *constatives* and *performatives*,<sup>109</sup> the first being true or false statements or descriptions, the second being sentences or utterances that actually *do* something, such as a promise, which is enacted in the very moment of being uttered. However, in his later work, he went beyond this distinction and went further in the direction of showing how the two blur into each other and all language is essentially performative. He concentrated specifically on ordinary language and defined literary language as ‘non-serious’. Here is the statement that was to arouse strong reactions on the part of Stanley Fish, Derrida and their likes:

A performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in any and every utterance—a sea-change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. (1975: 22)

Austin’s characterization of fictional language as ‘non-serious’ and ‘parasitic’ on ordinary language has been vehemently attacked, as it has been read as a disguised theory of metaphysical presence embodied in language, whereby literature would just be a hollow shell, an empty form and mirror of the more substantial, ‘original’ reality informing ordinary language. For Derrida (1988), language is characterised precisely by the iterability of its marks, and its citationality, which makes each utterance both unique and repeatable at the

<sup>108</sup> J. Austin, *How to do things with words*, J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (eds) second edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

<sup>109</sup> J. Austin, ‘Performative-Constative’, trans. G. J. Warnock, in C. E. Caton (ed.), *Philosophy and Ordinary Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963, pp. 22-54).

same time, according to different contexts. This aporia is what, in Derrida's point of view, underlies the performativity of all language.<sup>110</sup>

However, it may well be that some confusion about Austin's intended meaning ensued when his follower Searle (1977, 1979) defined literature as 'pseudo-performance' or 'pretence', against the 'serious' intentionality of ordinary language.<sup>111</sup> In his attempt to systematize his master's thought, he tried to distinguish 'serious' from 'non-serious' language on the basis of intentionality: whether the speaker is sincere or insincere and really means his or her statements. It is against this negative notion of pretence that Stanley Fish commented:

'Shared pretence' is what enables us to talk about anything at all. When we communicate, it is because we are parties to a set of discourse agreements which are in effect decisions as to what can be stipulated as a fact. It is these decisions and the agreement to abide by them, rather than the availability of substance, that make it possible for us to refer, whether we are novelists or reporters for the *New York Times*. One might object that this has the consequence of making all discourse fictional; but it would be just as accurate to say that it makes all discourse serious, and it would be better still to say that it puts all discourse on a par.<sup>112</sup>

Derrida's and Fish's readings both take for granted that 'seriousness' is to be accorded foundational import. Yet, as Loxley (2007) puts it, both Derrida and Fish shared a common mistaken attitude, that of 'focusing on Austin's characterization of the non-serious and its opposition to the ordinary', while missing out on Austin's critical reflection on the ways traditional philosophy has always searched for a 'solid foundation underlying the matrix of our linguistic lives, what Cavell calls its 'chronic *false* seriousness' [...].'<sup>113</sup>

Going one step further, I would like to suggest that literary language is important precisely *because* it is parasitic on ordinary language. And because it is parasitic on ordinary language it is *magical* yet in another sense.

Reflecting on the nature of the text, Paul De Man states:

<sup>110</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. S. Weber (Evanston: Chicago University Press, 1988).

<sup>111</sup> J. Searle, 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Gliph*, 1 (1977), pp. 198-208. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>112</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 242-43.

<sup>113</sup> James Loxley, *Performativity* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 87.

We call text any entity that can be considered from such a double perspective: as a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system [i.e., as a machine] and as a figural system closed off by a transcendental signification [i.e. as a linked chain of metaphors traceable to a final or literal meaning] that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence.<sup>114</sup>

In this perspective, the text ‘*performs* the interference’ (Loxley, 2007: 97) between two incompatible systems and is a sort of machine, rather than an organic unity. Thinking of magic as a technology, devised by humankind to attain certain results, can replace the idea of the mechanical machine and bring together the two systems by its very contradictory nature. Magic embodies both kinds of systems at once and works by drawing its materials for transformation from ‘ordinary’ reality and language. The space of the so-called ‘interference’ wherein the text enacts itself is marked off space, and the interference is played out in the act of reading, laid bare in the text, which is a truly magical script that works on the reader’s consciousness, enhancing, hypnotizing, focusing, refreshing, provoking, and at the same time is modelled by the reader’s idiosyncratic disposition. In this way the ‘interference’ is the matrix of manifold possibilities, and the reader’s disposition is the lens that refracts and makes them converge and diverge.

But in what way is literary language ‘parasitical’ on ordinary language? The use of metaphor and metonymy is at the base of language, both ordinary and literary. Literary metaphors are special because they rework ordinary metaphors. The same is true of magic, if we remember its definition as a rhetorical art. The linguist Kövecses (2010) states precisely that literary metaphors draw on ordinary ones<sup>115</sup>:

Ordinary metaphors, [...] are not things that poets and writers leave behind when they do their ‘creative’ work. On the contrary, accumulating evidence suggests that ‘creative’ people make heavy use of conventional, everyday metaphors and that their creativity and originality actually derive from them. (52)

Thus, ordinary language is metaphorical *per se*, and it is a kind of constraining grid within which each speaker of that language can perform creative speech

<sup>114</sup> Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 270.

<sup>115</sup> Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor, a Practical Introduction*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

acts. By reworking and transmuting materials of ordinary language, literary language is 'parasitical'; it appropriates and reworks conventional metaphors by the same devices used in magic. In particular the writer employs various ways of working on metaphors, such as 'extending', 'elaboration', 'questioning', 'personification', 'combining', 'image-metaphors' and 'mega-metaphors' (53-9). In 'extending' the writer adds some new connotation to an otherwise familiar metaphor, such as for example that of 'life as a journey'. There are myriads of famous poems that play on this metaphor, such as Dante's first lines of *The Inferno*. In 'elaboration', there is no adding of new elements but a reworking of the conventional metaphor in a new or unusual way. In 'questioning' writers can make a sort of meta-linguistic reflection on the very appropriateness of our daily metaphors. 'Personification' is a usual device both in ordinary and literary metaphors, while 'combining' entails the bringing together of different ordinary metaphors in such an original combination as to extend our conceptual system itself. 'Image-metaphors' are 'one-shot images that require the mapping of several elements of one image onto another' (Kövecses, 2010: 59). Finally, 'mega-metaphors' or 'extended metaphors' can run as a subterranean river throughout a whole literary work, only surfacing at certain junctures through 'micro-metaphors':

Some metaphors extend through entire literary texts or large portions of them. These are called 'extended metaphors' or 'mega-metaphors'. They may not explicitly 'surface' in the text at all but tend to appear in the form of what we call 'micro-metaphors'. (59)

In fact, in the readings of the novels that make up the second part of this dissertation, I intend to trace their mythical-ritual elements and magical themes and show to what extent they are 'mega-metaphors' that inform the whole net of the text.

At the beginning of his book, Kövecses underscores the difference between 'conceptual metaphors' and metaphorical usages of language:

We have made a distinction between conceptual metaphors and metaphorical linguistic expressions. In conceptual metaphors, one domain of experience is used to understand another domain of experience. The metaphorical linguistic expressions make manifest particular conceptual metaphors. The conceptual domain that we try to understand is called the target domain, and the conceptual domain that we use for this purpose is the source domain. (2010: 14)

I suggest that this distinction is fruitful when applied to the study of literary texts and can be well combined with a focus on those mythic-ritual elements that form various metaphorical clusters.

Another way of using language which is relevant to our study is metonymy:

Metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same domain, or idealized cognitive model (ICM). (Kövecses, 2010: 173)

Metonymy and metaphor differ in important ways. Metaphor, as we have seen, works by bringing together two distant domains by the rule of perceived similarity, which is usually grounded in lived experience. Hence, one of the two domains is abstract and the other is (more) concrete. Metonymy, instead, works by contiguity: two elements belong to the same conceptual domain and one gives access to the other according to different relations of contiguity, for example, whole and part, part and part, cause and effect, and so on. Both metaphor and metonymy are the foundation of magic, as anthropologist Tambiah has forcefully demonstrated in his essays on the study of magic and ritual, particularly the one on Trobriand magic.<sup>116</sup>

Following George Lakoff's definition of 'the neural theory of language',<sup>117</sup> Kövecses explains:

The extraordinary value of this theory derives from the suggestion that metaphor can also be found in the brain. Thus, the theory continues the extension of metaphor from language (linguistic metaphors) to mind (conceptual metaphors) to body (bodily basis of metaphor) and to brain. [...] The brain is made up of neurons. In the neural theory of language, neural groups are modelled as 'nodes'. Each neuron can function in different neural groups. Researchers in this paradigm think of semantics as simulation. [...] In this view, as regards the meaning of physical concepts, meaning is mental simulation. What this means is that we activate those neurons that are needed to perform or imagine an action. [...] Thought occurs when two groups of neurons, A and B, fire at the same time and activation spreads outward along the network links connecting them. [...] One neural group can activate another neural group [...] Neural bindings

<sup>116</sup> Stanley Jerayah Tambiah, *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass. And London, England: Harvard University Press, 1985). Particularly Tambiah, 'The Magical Power of Words', in *Culture, Thought and Social Action*, pp. 17–53.

<sup>117</sup> George Lakoff, *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

occur when two or more conceptual entities are taken to be a single entity. [...] As mentioned, there are different types of neural circuits. One type of neural circuit is what is called a 'linking circuit', which characterizes metonymy. [...] The circuit that characterizes metaphors is called a 'mapping circuit.' In this type of circuit, there will be two groups of nodes corresponding to source and target, and a number of linking nodes that connect elements in node one to elements in node two. It follows, then, that neural mapping circuits that link the two domains (nodes one and two) will constitute a metaphor. In the neural theory of metaphor, primary metaphors have special significance. [...] These are metaphors that we learn just by functioning naturally in the world. (Kövecses, 2010: 87-8)

I have quoted this passage at some length because of its mind-blowing bringing together of linguistic, mental and bodily processes in regard to metaphor and metonymy. According to this theory, metaphor and metonymy are not only 'tropes', or 'figures of style' but are indeed constitutive of the way we are in the world, we think, act, experience, make literature and art, among a plethora of other things. These claims support my argument for a performative concept of fiction, as literature entails a heightened and playful deployment of metaphor based on everyday experience and utterances, because meaning is recognized as 'mental simulation', or, to use another word, 'performance'. 'Simulation' is a word that may be interpreted in a negative way, 'performance' instead is more neutral. Moreover, it is evident that literary 'performance' is not hollow or void, but an enactment of language and text in a mental space which works inwardly with the same principles applied in magic.

The object of simulation is the characters' narrative quest with its twists and turns, while the emotional import of the story acts through both the character's and the reader's epiphanies, as we shall see in the next chapter.

## 5 Quest and Epiphany

In this chapter, I reflect on the relation between myth, the fantastic and epiphany in fiction, in order to propose that some contemporary hybrid fiction can be understood as ‘deformed romance’ and swings between the re-appropriation of the quest myth and its elaboration, in order to describe the character’s epiphany on one hand, and to provoke the reader’s own subjective epiphanic experience, on the other. Moreover, assessing both Frye’s and Jameson’s contributions about romance, I argue for the subversive potential of some contemporary ‘hybrid fictions’. In concluding the chapter, I also provide a definition of epiphany.

Mircea Eliade, the famous comparatist and historian of religions, thus commented on myth in the modern world:

A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays that he enjoys, in the books he reads. [...] Even reading includes a mythological function, not only because it replaces the recitation of myths in archaic societies and the oral literature that still lives in the rural communities of Europe, but particularly because, through reading, the modern man succeeds in obtaining an ‘escape from time’ comparable to the ‘emergence from time’ effected by myths. Whether modern man ‘kills’ time with a detective story or enters such a foreign temporal universe as is represented by any novel, reading projects him out of his personal duration and incorporates him into other rhythms, makes him live in another ‘history’.<sup>118</sup>

Indeed, it is the potential for more life and for the escape from one’s determined conditions of existence that make literature so appealing and rewarding worldwide. It is a race against time interpreted as mere linear progression from birth to growth, decay and death, a means to stating the negotiating power of imagination in regard to the inexorability of death and the perils of meaninglessness. Moreover, it is a life-enhancing experience that provides epiphanic moments of realization, which in turn contribute to reshaping and reconfiguring the reader’s disposition. The reader experiences the hero’s journey with the advantage of having the ability and possibility of detaching herself from the character’s vicissitudes, or effecting differing degrees of

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<sup>118</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959), p. 205.



identification with the protagonist. However, the reader's and the character's epiphanies may or may not coincide. The character's quest may end up in failure or in a totally different realization of meaning than s/he had attributed to his or her situation at the beginning of the novel. The reader, on the other hand, may gain a bird's-eye view, which in turn may trigger an in-depth meditation on a specific theme or situation. In the texts chosen for this study, however, it is difficult for the reader to identify himself with the characters, as so many strategies of estrangement are employed. This allows for a negotiation of meaning and empowerment through ritualization.

In the various balances between mimesis and fantasy of some contemporary works, a fundamental dramatization of the processes inherent in the interaction between reader's 'mind' and narrative/referential 'worlds' takes place. The blurring of the dividing line between inner and outer leads to the creation of an imaginative fluid space: an in-between space of hybridization between text, reader's mind and world that interact and act upon each other. By blending fantasy and mimesis, the text triggers and evokes both an insider's view and an outsider's view, through association and oxymoron on one hand, and logic and cause and effect on the other. This in-between space is the realm of the 'daimonic', the dimension of flux and becoming that to modern sensibilities has grown into the uncanny, both because of its displacement (in the Freudian sense) and because of its vengeful return as a too-demanding neighbour. This uncomfortable sense of a strange return and a singular displacement is enacted in the works this study analyses and has far-reaching implications for a genealogy of the West as we know it today.

Brian Attebery provides a polymorphous definition of fantasy 'as mode, genre, formula,'<sup>119</sup> which from his point of view allows for flexibility of approach when dealing with such a complex phenomenon. According to this critic, fantasy as 'formula' is characterized by easily recognizable plot structure and stock characters that make for its commercial definition; the fantastic as a 'mode' is entirely another matter, as it includes a vast number of texts, and can be at work also in 'realistic' texts (and this is the focus of this study). Between the two, there is fantasy as a 'genre': 'Genres may be approached as 'fuzzy sets', meaning that they are defined not by boundaries but by a centre.' (304) In his

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<sup>119</sup> Brian Attebery, 'Fantasy as Mode, Genre, Formula', in *Fantastic Literature: a Critical Reader*, ed. by David Sandner (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2004), pp. 293–309.

opinion the prototypical fantasy novel to an English mind is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which would thus constitute the centre of the 'genre' but not its boundaries. His idea is based on the consideration of readers' response when questioned about what novels belong to the genre. This, however, posits the question of cross-cultural comparison and perception, as the 'centre', as he calls it, can shift depending on the culture involved.

The novels analysed in subsequent chapters are approached from the point of view of the fantastic as a 'mode' or 'impulse' rather than as a genre. These novels display a tension between quest and epiphany: in fact, while the structure of the hero-quest and the strategies of romance are assumed, they are deformed, and epiphany goes in the direction of frustrating, diverting or delaying the quest, yielding alternative, jarring or discordant insights into the hidden motives and the results of the quest itself. Thus genre is diffused into an anarchical 'mode' or 'impulse'.

In a 1961 article, Frye defines 'displacement':

The opposite extreme from such deliberate exploiting of myth is to be found in the general tendency of realism or naturalism to give imaginative life and coherence to something closely resembling our own ordinary experience. Such realism often begins by simplifying its language, and dropping the explicit connexions with myth which are a sign of awareness of literary tradition. Wordsworth, for example, felt that in his day Phoebus and Philomela were getting to be mere trade slang for the sun and the nightingale, and that poetry would do better to discard this kind of inorganic allusion. But, as Wordsworth himself clearly recognized, the result of turning one's back on explicit myth can only be the reconstructing of the same mythical patterns in more ordinary words [...]

To this indirect mythologizing I have elsewhere given the name of displacement. By displacement I mean the techniques a writer uses to make his story credible, logically motivated or morally acceptable—lifelike, in short.<sup>120</sup>

Frye expounds on works, such as those by Trollope, that follow the dictates of 'critical naturalism' and display 'the highest degree of displacement and the least conscious explicit relationship to myth', but the more we study them, the more we realize that 'literature is a reconstructed mythology, with its structural principles derived from those of myth' (605).

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<sup>120</sup> Northrop Frye, 'Myth, Fiction and Displacement', *Daedalus*, vol. 90, no. 3, Evolution and Man's Progress (Summer, 1961), pp. 587-605, (602-3).

The chosen novels, be they somewhat ‘displaced’ or otherwise, are ‘a reconstructed mythology’ in that they are the result of an appropriation of the hero-quest, and its subsequent remythification according to a new vision.

## 5.1 Fantastic Impulse, the Imaginary and Epiphany

Wolfgang Iser (1993) defines literature as the ‘paradigmatic interplay’ of the fictive and the imaginary, the former being ‘an operational mode of consciousness that makes inroads into existing versions of the world’, while the latter is ‘basically a featureless and inactive potential’ (xvii), which cannot be grasped cognitively and needs to be activated. It has a history which has variously called it ‘fancy’, ‘imagination’, or ‘fantasy’, which however are only ‘specific context-bound demarcations of the imaginary’ (xvii). Thus, the fictive is ‘an act of boundary-crossing, which, nonetheless, keeps in view what has been overstepped. As a result the fictive simultaneously disrupts and doubles the referential world (xv). Iser concludes that literature allows ‘the staging of the human condition in a welter of unforeseeable patterns’ (literary staging) : ‘the impossibility of being present to ourselves becomes our possibility to play ourselves out to the fullness that knows no bounds’, ‘literature becomes a panorama of what is possible’ and ‘makes the interminable staging of ourselves appear as the postponement of the end’ (xviii - xix).

In spite of these insights, Iser sees fantasy literature as a reification of fantasy itself and myth as ‘ossified’ (91-2). Although Iser talks about the ‘ossification of the imaginary in fantasy literature’ (240), he also distinguishes between two forms of fantasy literature:

[...] since fantasy is reified by being thematized, and since it constitutes the reality of the impossible, it brings about a latent split in the reader’s consciousness. In the context of this split, we may discern two different types of fantasy literature. One uses rhetoric and psychology to give the reader a homeopathic dose of the split in order that it may be sustained, and the other always incorporates ‘a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality’ so that the reader is plunged into a state of ‘hesitation’. In the first case, the split is to be concealed, and in the second it is played out. (245-46)

While referring to classical studies of the fantastic such as those of Jackson and Todorov, Iser does indeed acknowledge the difference between what can be defined escapist fantasy literature and subversive fantasy literature. He also defines fantasy as an 'event' (172) and refers to Husserl's definition:

'Fantasy', says Husserl, 'is through and through modification, and it cannot contain anything other than modification.' [...] For fantasy, one should add, has no objects of its own; instead it manifests itself in consciousness by altering the latter's relation to objects through changing a realizing consciousness into an ideating one. (202-3)

As it is evident from the quote on the two kinds of fantasy fiction, Iser sees fantasy literature as a reification of fantasy itself. Yet, if fantasy is not reduced to a mere formula for the marketplace, it can be read as a protean stage of a process of de-reification which engages the reader in an active way in so far as, through hybridization and boundary-crossing, it unveils the ideological constructs of the dominant or prevalent *episteme*, and in the case of fiction that tries to rewrite history by re-inscribing myth and fable into it, it can also criticize this *episteme*, and offer its genealogy and emergence in history. Even single *epistemes* are not written in stone, but are 'magmatic' (a term borrowed from Castoriadis) in nature, that is they are fluid or can coagulate at different stages of the socio-historical dimension.

As we shall see, the texts analysed here show quite a different kind of fantasy from Iser's: the fantastic impulse complicates fictional boundary-crossing, because it displaces a version of the world that we take for granted and refracts it into a myriad of diffused details. This new refracted version is independent because it is constructed through the various combinations of textual games, different forms of play that Iser, following Caillois, defines as *agon*, *mimicry*, *alea* and *ilinx*: the first representing the contest between alternative viewpoints, events, or even characters' actions; the second playing out the taste for deformation and the grotesque; the third, embodying the principle of chance and chaos in the narrative; and the fourth expressing a peculiar sense of kaleidoscopic vertigo. Thus in fantasy the extra-textual world is mirrored in a deformed way and in a refracted version. If staging is a fictionalizing act that can be expressed through mimesis, whereby the co-presence of the mutually exclusive is vouchsafed (the textual world is both

different from itself and still itself, pointing to what it eludes in an adumbrated fashion), fantasy makes our versions of the world *figuratively differential*. It articulates the ungraspable aspect of the imaginary in yet another fictional version. Fiction is no longer representation, but becomes 'intervention' in whatever version of the world we live in. Thus fiction is 'actual' and exists, albeit 'unreal'.

Iser conceives the anthropological category of 'staging' in order to account for the meaning of being human. He declares that human beings cannot 'have' themselves, and by staging the infinite possibilities inherent in their ungraspable condition, they continually repattern their culture-bound shapes. This process is particularly evident in literature:

Staging in literature makes conceivable the extraordinary plasticity of human beings, who precisely because they do not seem to have a determinable nature, can expand into an almost unlimited range of culture-bound patternings. The impossibility of being present to ourselves becomes our possibility to play ourselves out to a fullness that know no bounds, because no matter how vast the range, none of the possibilities 'will make us tick.' From this we may infer a lead as to the purpose of literary staging. If the plasticity of human nature allows, through its multiple culture-bound patternings, limitless human self-cultivation, literature becomes a panorama of what is possible, because it is not hedged in either by the limitations or the considerations that determine the institutionalized organizations within which human life otherwise takes its course.<sup>121</sup>

In *The Fictive and The Imaginary*, Iser compares 'literary staging' to 'evidential experiences' (epiphanies), such as love, that is, situations 'when human beings are in full possession of what is or what they are in', experiences 'characterized by instantaneous certainty', as 'the exact opposite of inaccessibility' (1993: 299). More precisely:

Evidential experience is almost like an assault; it happens to us, and we are inside it. But the experience awakens in us a desire to look at what has happened to us, and this is when the evidence explodes into alternatives. The alternatives cannot make themselves independent, they remain linked to the evidential experience to which we want to gain access. But this means that instantaneous certainties trigger the need for staging in the exactly the same way as the cardinal mysteries [of human life i.e. birth, love, death]. [...] Staging then entails giving them [evidential experiences] form, but this form can only be a

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<sup>121</sup> Wolfgang Iser, 'Staging as an Anthropological Category', *New Literary History*, Vol. 23 No. 4 (Autumn, 1992), pp. 877-88 (here p. 881).

simulacrum that highlights the inadequacy of form when it comes to providing appearance for such an experience, which far exceeds the capacity of consciousness. [...] the simulacrum is a product of sophisticated invention that reveals the artificiality of endowing a phantasmic figuration with form. [...] Staging is thus the absolute form of doubling, not least because it always retains awareness that this doubling is ineradicable. [...] It does give form to the inaccessible, but it preserves the status of the latter by revealing itself as a simulacrum. (300-1)

Here Iser refers to literature in general and not to fantasy specifically. In fact, we have seen that for him fantasy is reification rather than 'a simulacrum'. Yet, what if not the literary fantastic stages the very process of staging? The fantastic presents the reader with alternatives, different points of view thus mimicking the very process whereby we gain and produce knowledge, perceive and ideate through the ungraspable 'magma' of the imaginary. The fantastic makes use of proliferating signs, symbols, mythical elements in order to stage our condition of human beings craving for alternatives, and by so doing it exposes our socio-cultural presuppositions and biases. In so doing, it provides the reader with the possibility of an epiphanic experience of vast affective and intellectual impact. It is a possibility only available to sophisticated, perceptive readers, yet it is of subversive import. By fanning out simulacrum after simulacrum and continually discarding one after the other, the fantastic reveals the power of the epiphany as an emergence from an ineffable unconscious dimension, both at collective and individual levels.

## 5.2 The Re-Appropriation of the Quest Myth

The hero-quest myth has been analyzed and described by scholars of religion, folklorists and psychoanalysts, who have considered its narrative value and its function in society: from Rank's Freudian interpretation of the hero-quest (1909), wherein myth serves a regressive symbolic fulfilment of an oedipal repressed wish, which society cannot countenance, to Lord Raglan (1936) and the myth-ritualists, for whom myth is a 'script' for a corresponding ritual. In this view the hero-quest encompasses the whole life of a heroic king in twenty-two

stages.<sup>122</sup> For Jung, myth has a positive psychological function, that of helping the individual integrate the dangerous drives of the unconscious. He links the archetype of the child both to a god and a 'young hero', whose characteristics blur into the typical invincibility of the child-hero who slays the dragon of darkness and achieves individuation.<sup>123</sup> Joseph Campbell ([1949], 1993) summarizes the hero's quest in the following stages:<sup>124</sup> the hero is called to adventure, he crosses the threshold of adventure and encounters a helper, he may go through a battle with his brother or with a dragon, or there may be dismemberment, crucifixion, abduction, a night-sea journey, a wonder journey or may be swallowed in a whale's belly. He undergoes tests and meets other helpers. A sacred marriage, recognition by his father or creator, an apotheosis or an elixir theft takes place. He flees and reaches the threshold back to the ordinary world where he may struggle to go back, he can be rescued or resurrected if dead and returns with the elixir of boon, in order to benefit his community. As Campbell himself says, the hero mono-myth can be reworked *ad infinitum*: 'Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full circle [...], others string a number of independent cycles into a single series [...]' (246).

Canadian critic Northrop Frye states in a 1951 article: 'It is part of the critic's business to show how all literary genres derived from the quest-myth'.<sup>125</sup> He refers specifically to medieval romance as his model, thus implicitly denying any strong opposition between the novel and romance and advocating their continuity.

Indeed, the narrative structure of many contemporary non-realistic novels is that of 'deformed' romance, whereby the hero or heroine's aspirations are either baffled or deflected into various unpredictable directions. Drawing both on Frye's and on Parker's work, Barbara Fuchs considers romance as

a literary and textual *strategy*. Under this definition, the term describes a concatenation of both narratological elements and literary

<sup>122</sup> Otto Rank, 'The Myth of the Birth of the Hero', in Robert A. Segal (ed.), in *In Quest of the Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, c1990) and Lord Raglan, *The Hero: a Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (New York: Vintage, 1956). (The second part of the latter can also be found in Segal).

<sup>123</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, *The Collected Works*, vol. 9, Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler (eds.), trans. by R. C. F. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 151-81.

<sup>124</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: Fontana Press, 1993).

<sup>125</sup> Northrop Frye, 'The Archetypes of Literature', *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Winter, 1951), pp. 92-110, (105).

*topoi*, including idealization, the marvellous, narrative delay, wandering, and obscured identity, that, as Parker suggests, both pose a quest and complicate it.<sup>126</sup>

Romance is based on conflict and adventures, and it is possible to see it as that which underlies all fantasy: even its contemporary rewritings start from this *mythos* in order to rework it and recombine or transmute its components. Interestingly, Frye talks of a ritual aspect pertaining to the *mythos* of romance, which he assimilates to summer: 'Translated into ritual terms, the quest-romance is the victory of fertility over the wasteland'.<sup>127</sup> He thus points to a pre-modern tradition that can be useful as a reading key to literature, as he identifies what can be called the basic drives behind the human need to create art and literature. It is important to stress this need for ritual, for a meaningful pattern and integration of meaning for human activities: the re-inscribing of the ritual, that is, the communal dimension, into the process of producing literature. Now, in contemporary novels which deform romance and make use of its strategies with the intent of questioning hegemonic ideological assumptions, this ritual dimension becomes problematic in that it no longer signals a 'victory' but rather the ambiguity of the relationship between author and audience in a post-industrial society.

In his famous critique of Frye, Frederic Jameson states that both the semantic (i.e. Frye) and the structural or formalist (i.e. Propp) schools of criticism need to be historicized in order to account for the workings and origin of literature within its context of production in a dialectical perspective.<sup>128</sup> Jameson exposes, in Frye's notion of romance, what he calls 'this particular ideologeme - ethics, or the binary opposition between good and evil' as 'the ideological core of the romance paradigm' (Sandner 2004: 190). In his impressive treatment of romance, Jameson shows what historical conditions of medieval times were dramatized in the form of the romance or *chanson de geste*. In a previous version (1975) of the same essay, Jameson states that 'romance comes to be seen as the struggle between the higher and lower realms, between heaven and hell, or the angelic and the demonic or diabolic' and he writes of 'the conceptual opposition between good and evil' as being anthropological,

<sup>126</sup> Barbara Fuchs, *Romance* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), p. 8 (emphasis in original).

<sup>127</sup> Northrop Frye, 'The Mythos of Romance', in *Fantastic Literature: a Critical Reader*, ed. by David Sandner (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2004), p. 115.

<sup>128</sup> Frederic Jameson, 'Magical Narratives: on the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism,' in Sandner, pp. 180–217.



historical and ideological, rather than natural.<sup>129</sup> Jameson believes that such a belief is closely linked ‘to the social structure’ in which it ‘fulfils a crucial function’ (140) and adds:

In the shrinking world of today, indeed, with its gradual levelling of class and national and racial differences, it is becoming increasingly clear that the concept of evil is at one with the category of Otherness itself: evil characterizes whatever is radically different from me [...]. (140)

Thus, in Jameson’s assessment the limit of Frye’s otherwise rich approach is to naturalise ethic categories of good and evil, which Nietzsche had already exposed in their ideological function and historical formation in his *Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Furthermore, for Jameson this binary opposition within romance has ‘the function of drawing the boundaries of a given social order and providing a powerful internal deterrent against deviancy or subversion’ (140).

The social antagonism involved is therefore quite distinct from the conflict of two groups or classes *within* a given social order, as in the case in recent times, say, between labor and capital; and the archaic character of the categories of romance (magic, good and evil, otherness) suggests that this genre expresses a nostalgia for a social order in the process of being undermined and destroyed by nascent capitalism, yet still for the moment coexisting side by side with the latter. (158, emphasis in the original)

In his later reworked essay, Jameson re-iterates this point: he sees how in romance the moment the villain is unmasked and no longer dangerous ‘raises a new and productive dilemma for the future development and adaptation of this form’, because ‘evil’ is ‘projectively reconstituted into a free-floating and disembodied element, a baleful optical illusion, in its own right’, ‘the ‘realm’ of sorcery and magical forces’ (in Sandner, 2004: 193).

Now, in many contemporary non-realistic re-workings of romance ‘the seme of evil’ is re-appropriated both in its projections onto an ‘Other’ and in its social and cultural manifestations. More often than not, the ‘Other’ is exposed as being at the very heart of that which constitutes the norm. Thus in *The Iguana* the protagonist Daddo projects onto other characters alternative and strange identities, only to discover with a shock of horror, that he himself

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<sup>129</sup> Frederic Jameson, ‘Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre’, in *New Literary History*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Critical Challenges: The Bellagio Symposium (Autum, 1975), pp. 135-63 (here p. 138 and 190).

is the culprit and perpetrator of injustice. In *Lanark*, 'Otherness' is posited as being at the very core of that complex institutional web of rationalism, scientism and capitalism embodied in 'The Creature' and 'The Institute', those ruling bodies of science and politics that feed on people, both literally and metaphorically. In *Measuring the World* the realm of otherness is located within the irreducible character of reality, and even more in Humboldt's alienating attempts at grasping and measurement. This means that romance is no longer an escapist hegemonic expression of the ruling class but is invested with subversive verve.

Castoriadis (1987) shows how both Marxism and capitalism subscribe to the same paradigm of the fundamental importance of economy in order to construct social institutions that make human beings into productive units.<sup>130</sup> He criticizes the whole of Western philosophy for going in this direction and argues for the social imaginary as the indeterminate ground for all institutions, customs, laws and traditions. He shows how both capitalism and Marxism subscribe to the same imaginary idea of 'progress', whereby the economy is the key to human life, and he objects to this view as reductive. Castoriadis sees creativity as the indeterminate basis of manifestation of both social imaginary and individual imagination. At the same time, psychoanalysis too, both Freudian and Lacanian, has blundered in seeing fantasy either as wish-fulfilment of something already lived and experienced, or as the 'other' of the self, thus being already over-determined. For Castoriadis the imaginary is a radical, indeterminate 'magma'. He questions the definition of time given by Western philosophy throughout its history and points out how, since Plato, time has been spatialized according to a notion of being conceived as determinacy, and regulated by an ensemblist and identitary logic, whereby time can only be defined as immutable totality, 'a system and a hierarchy' (1987: 198).

In his book on the imaginary (1987) Castoriadis depicts the way the imaginary significations and the 'social-historical' self-instituting society work according to the principles of 'legein' and 'teukhein' typical of the 'ensemblist-identitary logic' of the metaphysics of substance, or being, which has always been at the base of rationalism and scientism:

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<sup>130</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

*Legein*: distinguish-choose-posit-assemble-count-speak; at once the condition and the creation of society, the condition created by what itself conditions. [...] In order to speak of a set or an ensemble, or to think of one, we must be able to distinguish-choose-posit-assemble-count-say objects. The nature of these objects is of little matter, universally is here [...] absolute [...]. (223)

*Teukhein* signifies: assembling-adjusting-fabricating-constructing. It is, therefore, making (something) be as... starting from ... in a manner appropriate to ...and in view of ... What has been called *techne*, a word that derives from *teukhein* and that has given the term technique, is but a particular manifestation of *teukhein* and concerns only secondary and derivative aspects of it. For example, 'before' there can be any question of 'technique' of any sort, the social imaginary must assemble-adjust-fabricate-construct itself as society and as this society, it must make itself be as society and as this society, starting with itself and with what 'is there', in a manner appropriate to and in view of being a society and this particular society. *Teukhein* is implied in instituting, just as *legein* is. [...] *legein* and *teukhein* refer to one another and circularly imply one another. [...] *Teukhein* intrinsically implies *legein*, is in a sense a *legein*, for it operates and is able to exist only by distinguishing-choosing-assembling-positing-counting. *Teukhein* separates 'elements', fixes them as such, orders them, combines them, unites them into totalities and organized hierarchies of totalities within the field of doing. And in this field, it operates under the aegis of determinacy and as actual determination and the condition for all determination.-- Conversely, *legein* intrinsically implies *teukhein*, is in a sense *teukhein*. For it assembles-adjusts-fabricates-constructs the 'abstract-material' elements of language along with all the 'objects' and 'relations' corresponding to them. (260)

In this sense, Castoriadis recognizes the needs of the *homo hierarchicus*, the human need for structure and order in its manifold guises, but only to relativize them as a particular expression of the radical imaginary. From this point of view, when Kenneth Burke says that the spirit of hierarchy is characteristic of man, the symbol-using animal, he is following the same identitary logic based on the presuppositions of ontology, while according to Castoriadis even this specific kind of logic is not pre-given but a manifestation of the radical imaginary both in society and in the individual subject. Therefore, Castoriadis goes much deeper than Burke in acknowledging an eidetic dimension which is magmatic and goes beyond the symbolism of the sign too, in a way structuralism cannot.

These ideas are obviously relevant to the study of the subversive potential of fantastic literature and can be also linked to yet another view of epiphany, as an event related specifically to the fantastic: in fact both

epiphany and fantasy have their common etymology in the Greek verb *phanein*, to show, to reveal.

Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1976) shows how even the Marxist materialist conception of history has been ‘naturalized’ in Western culture, when he points out how in *Capital* Marx takes for granted the reason why ‘certain commodities are produced and not others’ and explains how even the consumption of certain goods rather than others is determined by and undertaken ‘within a symbolic order, within culture.’<sup>131</sup>

Commenting on the introductory pages of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, where the philosopher sets out to define ‘the relations between production, distribution, exchange and consumption’ (1976: 153), Sahlins states:

Consumption, which started out in mutual interdependence with production, is in the end subordinated to production: a change of status to which corresponds a change of time, from the ‘pre-existing image’ to the objective consequence. This redefinition of the relationship depends on assigning consumption all the vagueness of an ‘impulse’, while allowing to production all the definiteness of the object. Here then is a condensed symbol of the anthropological deception in Marx’s program: the relapse from ‘imagination’ to ‘perception’, and so from culture to nature. As ‘want’ or ‘impulse’, consumption is at this moment situated in the realm of the natural; while as the source of the object-form, production alone is historical. The need-without-shape, moreover, is realized as content by perception of the object; thus all consumption, including its influence upon production, depends on the historical movement of production. I stress the ‘perception’. The seeing eye here is not the organ of tradition but the instrument of desire. The mind, therefore, does not organize experience but follows it. (1976: 155)

In the quote above, Sahlins, like Castoriadis, questions the primacy of economic production as the first and foremost given ‘fact’ in shaping human cultures. In fact, by showing that at the basis of the Marxist conception there is a split between the previously interdependent production and consumption processes and the consequent primacy of production, Sahlins points the finger at a specific culture-bound and biased way of conceptualising the organization of human experience. In other words, *homo economicus*, in the classical western sense of the word, is only a culture-specific abstraction, which has ended up shaping and conditioning a certain ‘global culture’ at large.

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<sup>131</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press: 1976), p. 148-49.

These observations about Marxist presuppositions are particularly fruitful and relevant: although a Marxist approach to literature has its merits, as Jameson and others' works testify, it also needs to be historicized and placed in the context of the culture which produced and continues to shape it. Moreover, it is possible to re-appropriate the role of 'imagination' over 'perception' and 'culture' and 'nature' as whole by studying the demystifying powers of some literature that employs fantasy in conspicuous ways and in doing so destabilizes old perceptive habits and assumptions.

### 5.3 Epiphany and the Double-Sidedness of Myth

In his book (1971) on the subject, Beja defines epiphany in the following way:<sup>132</sup>

a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind - the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it. (18)

Beja does not clarify how epiphany manifests and constitutes itself: is it an object/event revealing itself fully or is it a synchronistic event whereby an outer object or circumstance strikes the subject with inner significance? Beja seems indecisive and highlights how many authors oscillate between the two. A second author, Nichols (1987) tracks the origins of the 'moment of vision' in Wordsworth's work and pursues its development in poetry throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>133</sup> Both Beja and Nichols differentiate between religious revelation (Augustine, Bunyan, Wesley, etc.) and secular epiphany (Modernism, Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner in particular), showing how the former is a revelation of external, divine grace, whereas the second is a manifestation of the mind's inner power, triggered by the contemplation of a seemingly trivial object, or by a sudden flash of recognition of the same.

Nichols quotes lines 1288-1296 of the 1799 two-part 'Prelude' by Wordsworth about the 'spots of time' and states:

The Wordsworthian epiphany declares an otherness outside of the self, while at the same time acknowledging a self-conscious self,

<sup>132</sup> Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Owen, 1971).

<sup>133</sup> Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987).

aware of this otherness and open to connections with the world. (43-4)

He then quotes a letter by Wordsworth:

Objects ... derive their influence not from properties inherent in them ... but from such as are bestowed upon them by the minds of those who are conversant with or affected by those objects. Thus the Poetry, if there be any in the work, proceeds whence it ought to do, from the Soul of Man, communicating its creative energies to the images of the external world. (Quoted in Nichols, 1987: 54)

It is possible to link this definition of epiphany to Frye's notion of the 'oracular' (1951). For his part, Frye assimilates literature to both music and painting: 'we may call the rhythm of literature the narrative, and the pattern, the simultaneous mental grasp of the verbal structure, the meaning or significance.' (102) Although Frye overstates the 'pull of ritual' as altogether unconscious, the important point is that narrative is connected to the temporal unfolding of fiction. Frye continues:

Patterns of imagery, on the other hand, or fragments of significance, are oracular in origin, and derive from the epiphanic moment, the flash of instantaneous comprehension with no direct reference to time [...]. And just as pure narrative would be an unconscious act, so pure significance would be an incommunicable state of consciousness, for communication begins by constructing a narrative. (103)

Can epiphany be considered a mythicizing process in the text? Kenneth Burke in his *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966) notes about James Joyce's story 'The Dead':

The final twist, what Joyce would call an 'epiphany', is contrived by the transforming of 'snow' from a *sensory* image to a *mythic* image. That is, in the first part of the story, the references to snow are wholly realistic ('lexical' snow, snow as defined in a dictionary). But at the end, snow has become a *mythic* image, manifesting itself in the world of conditions, but standing for transcendence above the conditioned. It is a snow that bridges two realms - but, as befits the behaviour of snow, this Upward Way is figured in terms of a Downward Way, as the last paragraph features, the present participle, 'falling'. (Quoted in Coupe 2005: 162)

In this perspective epiphany becomes a way of experiencing the mythical dimension; epiphany transforms its object into a myth, reworking ordinary time

into *kairos* or ‘imaginative time’ (Nichols 1987: 24). If epiphany is triggered by apparently trivial objects or situations, it sparks off our inner response which is mythic or mythicizing. In the novel the mythical dimension is made secular (Eliade’s ‘secular myths’) and can be accessed inwardly, while shaping people’s collective imaginary too. Epiphany had originally a religious meaning, and secular epiphany still has its sacred counterpart in ‘hierophany’, as defined by Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959):

To designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term hierophany. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e. that *something sacred shows itself* to us. (Quoted in Marderness 2009: 42)

In a similar way, secular epiphany is the revelation, ‘the manifestation’ of the mythical aspect of an ordinary phenomenon. Myth, in this sense, transcends its narrative aspect in order to become a sign for something ‘other’. Thus the mythical is closely linked to the linguistic, a characteristic which is proper of man, ‘the symbol-using animal’:

Close to the essence of this animal is the problem of the negative, of words for nothing, minus, thou-shalt-not, hence the yes-and-no of ‘polar’ terms which, since man is an organism living in time whereas logical relations as such are timeless, can provide mythic-narrative equivalents for non-temporal aspects of symbolism (equivalents which, if pursued persistently enough, are found to track back upon themselves, thus ultimately denying the very progression whereby they seemed to progress. (Burke 1960: 304)

Thus ‘imaginative time’ is articulated through the linguistic ‘negative’ and is thoroughly inscribed in the human make-up as an ‘organism’. Though by different means, Roland Barthes makes a similar point when he states ([1957], 2009: 137) that myth is ‘a second-order semiological system’, in which the link between ‘form’ and ‘concept’ is motivated, that is, artificial and invented.<sup>134</sup> Ultimately, according to these authors, the regaining of the mythical dimension happens through language.

We have just distinguished between two aspects of myth: myth as a narrative and myth as a second-order sign. How are the two to be reconciled for our purposes of reading fiction? It is necessary to follow Burke, Barthes and

<sup>134</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Myth Today’, in *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2010)

Marderness through their respective arguments in order to reconcile the two and show the relevance of epiphany.

In his 'Myth, Poetry and Philosophy' (1960), Kenneth Burke refers to literary myth as a narrative which operates according to the Aristotelian principle of *entelechy*, whereby any narrative aims at the fulfilment of its perfect form. In other words, myth as a narrative moves in the direction of its poetic formal fulfilment, staging the dialectical opposition of a 'Favoured Principle and an Unfavoured Principle' in terms of primordial first occurrences, what Burke calls 'the temporizing of essence' (284). Discussing the folkloristic approach to the 'combat myth', as analyzed in a 1959 book by Joseph Fontenrose, Burke asks:

Regardless of where the 'combat myth' came from, and how many transformations it may have undergone, to what extent can we derive its form from the logic of that form? [...] In brief, Poetics would ask: in order to be a 'perfect combat myth', what form 'ought' the story have? (286)

Burke shows how the two principles described by Fontenrose as Eros and Thanatos, forever struggling with each other, are a recombination of the logical antithesis life-death, love-hate, founded on 'that peculiarly linguistic marvel, the *negative*' (288).

[...] once you have translated the logical principle of antithesis into terms of narrative combat, by the same token you have set the conditions for a purposive development. Thus, for instance, the principle of disorder can be pictured as aiming to win over the principle of order, and vice versa, so that the purely directionless way in which polar terms imply each other can be replaced by schemes intensely *teleological*, as with 'quest-myths' recounting the earnest effort to attain some greatly desired object or destination, a category wide enough to include all mythic narratives insofar as such narratives involve action and all action implies *purpose*. (289, my emphasis)

This explains myth as a narrative. On the other hand, in 'Myth Today', Barthes defines myth 'as a second-order semiological system' ([1957], 2009: 137), which appropriates a sign (either linguistic or an image) and transforms it in the first term of a second semiological chain. In the process, this sign or 'language-object' is emptied of its historical meaning to become a form whose meaning is put at a distance. To this form impoverished of meaning corresponds a concept which elaborates on a certain 'knowledge of reality'. The less rich the meaning,



the more condensed the concept, such as, for example, a red rose becoming a general symbol for passion and losing all its specific attributes. The association of form and concept is the 'signification', which is characterised by a relation of 'deformation': 'Myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear.' (145)

Are Burke and Barthes talking about different phenomena?

In his study of the dynamics of myth, William Marderness (2009) re-appropriates and extends Barthes' model and terminology, providing a comprehensive theory of how to read a myth. In his interpretation, myth is both a second-order sign and a narrative. According to Marderness, myth can be read in four different ways: 'mythical reading', 'cultural reading', 'extra-mythical reading', and 'mythological reading'. In a mythical reading, such as the Christian attitude towards the Bible, a language-object which is both a meaning and a form is 'naturally' linked to a concept, which provides a prototype or 'archetype'. In other words, a mythical reading delimits a form and a concept and elaborates a narrative providing a historical context which gives access to 'archetypes'. These in turn give meaning to the believers' lives. Thus the attitude in a mythical reading is that of belief in a 'Scripture'.

In a cultural reading, instead, a myth is considered literature, tale or legend. It is an uncritical reading in that the link between a form and its concept happens by convention: the concept is a conventional idea and the relation of signification is therefore explicit and disambiguated through lexicalization in the same way a metaphor becomes institutionalized and disambiguates its meaning.

In an extra-mythical reading the attitude is that of curiosity: myth is considered a curious story in a strange context because, unlike the cultural reading, an extra-mythical reading sees myth outside of a meaningful cultural context. In other words, form and concept are indefinite and are linked to each other by speculation. This kind of reading takes place when we do not understand or know the cultural matrix which has shaped a certain myth.

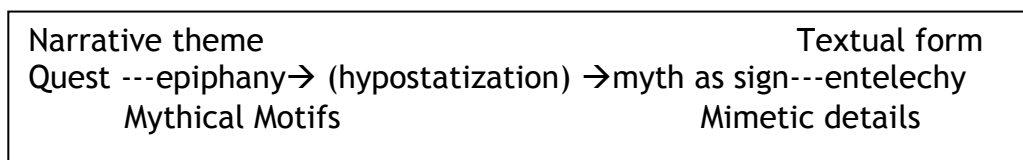
Finally, a mythological reading provides a theoretical system for the analysis of myth. Therefore, as a study of myth, or mythology, it is a third-order sign which explicates the link between form and meaning. Thus it is a critical reading that 'deciphers' myth and makes the meaning prominent and distinguished from the form. This is the scholarly or erudite attitude. Deciphered myth may be remythicized, therefore mythological reading gets outside one

myth and inside another. Deciphered myth is seen as a mythical narrative aiming at persuasion, rhetoric, or propaganda.

As Marderness says in the conclusion to his book:

Diverse interpretations of myth can be understood through one system. The ideas that myth is a sign and that myth is a narrative are complementary. Barthes studies myths as signs, yet his interpretation accommodates Saussure's idea of value, that a sign is defined through its relation to other signs. The signs that contextualize a given sign as a myth are often carried by a narrative. Mythologists who study myths as narratives expound mythical narratives, the narratives that contextualize myths as signs. Yet these scholars also explain the signs. For example, Eliade explicates a sacred stone, a myth (as sign) contextualized by a mythical narrative. (126)

Following the implications of Marderness' mythological reading, it is possible to state that many contemporary non-realistic novels make use of post-mythological textual strategies, and can be approached as remythicized narratives of deformed romance and subversion. Fiction that employs post-mythological strategies swings in various ways between the poles of narrative theme and textual form. The hero-quest corresponds to the pole of myth as narrative and is characterized by recurrent or more or less hidden motifs, what Frye calls 'archetypes'. On the other hand, at the level of textual form fiction tends to appropriate and fulfil the poetic principle of Aristotelian entelechy, while it can also add mimetic details which make the story more 'life-like'. In-between these two poles the two processes of epiphany as insight and 'manifestation' and of myth as a second-order sign take place. More precisely, epiphany is the process that hypostatizes ordinary or trivial elements into myth as a second-order sign. Here is a diagram to summarize the whole process:



Myth becomes the pliable tool of the fictional magic, offering multifarious possibilities in the novels which make use of post-mythological narrative strategies, which rework myth by deformation and, in so doing, can either demythologize or remythicize it according to new agendas. For example, in Ortese's *The Iguana* form is rather indeterminate and the quest is refracted

through the protagonist's perception of other characters' metamorphoses, while some images provide motifs that have an epiphanic function in the story. In *Lanark*, instead, the two poles of form and theme are rather balanced, while in *Measuring the World* the double quest of its protagonists is structured around clusters of magical or supernatural motifs enriched with ordinary details. This is a structuralist explanation, which, moreover, entails that we take myth and the fantastic as merging or flowing into each other. Moreover, if a pre-linguistic dimension is taken into account, the landscape acquires considerable depth. To the idea of myth as both a narrative and a sign, and epiphany as a mythicizing process, bringing together structuralist and formalist insights, we can add some insights of cognitive linguistics, in order to understand the phenomenon of epiphany better and see how myth is not only a linguistic product or result, but, *qua* narrative, a structuring principle of thought.

According to Mark Turner in his *The Literary Mind* (1996), 'parable precedes grammar', and 'the linguistic mind is a consequence and a subcategory of the literary mind.' Both the literary mind and everyday mind are founded on parable, what he calls 'the projection of story'.<sup>135</sup> In other words, Turner declares that the literary mind is not derivative and that story projection is fundamental for the way we think every day. By 'story' he means image-schematic structures that can be spatial or non-spatial (especially based on actions). An example of the former is 'life is a journey', the latter, instead, can be exemplified by 'the sailor was beaten mercilessly by savage winds' (28). In real life, a journey takes place in space and when we understand life as a journey we project a spatial image-scheme on life. In the second case, instead, we project action on the winds, which are turned into agents and the sailor becomes a victim.

According to Turner, everyday language is based on parable-like projection of image-schematic stories, which shape basic conceptual metaphors that structure our understanding of the world and of our experience. Conventional metaphors are basic metaphors where we no longer perceive the blended space where a source input and a target input produce something new. Literary metaphors start from basic conceptual metaphors, but then they elaborate the blended space resulting from the interaction between the source and target domains. Turner says that literary fantasies are rich

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<sup>135</sup> Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), here p. 141 and 7.

elaborations of blended spaces. Both conventional and literary metaphors rely on parable: the projection of image-schematic stories onto other stories.<sup>136</sup>

In Chapter 3 on myth-making and ritualised consciousness, I defined myth as a structure of consciousness and an image-making process. Images can only be conceived in space, whether internal or external. This is in keeping with Turner's insight into the projection of basic spatial stories onto other domains of experience. Spatialisation is also our way of understanding time: linear, circular, spiral-like. Epiphany is an inner 'manifestation' which brings together our categories of space and time and seeks to overcome contingency: an epiphany is an insight whereby our psychic structures make temporal the eternal and eternalise the temporal through language, making something apparently trivial mythical in character. This is so in order to understand, give meaning and importance to our human, transient experience and it happens through what Lakoff in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999: 566) calls 'empathic projection', a phenomenon typical of mysticism, spirituality, and, of course, magic.

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<sup>136</sup> In contrast to Turner's blending theory when applied to metaphor, Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens in 'Literary Metaphor Between Cognition and Narration', in Monika Fludernik (ed.) *Beyond Cognitive Metaphor Theory. Perspectives on Literary Metaphor* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 58-76 mention other scholars' research and espouse the tenet of the 'overt incongruity' of the literary metaphor, whereby two different kinds of knowledge are mobilized and the reader holds two different points of view simultaneously. This would account for the fact that literary metaphors retain their freshness at each new reading. However, I would say that the reader's disposition and the context of reading is also of paramount importance for the effect of the literary metaphor. Furthermore, it seems to me that blending and the above theory of the stereoscopic vision are not in contradiction, but are different aspects of the same process. Blending may be static and is a conceptual end product, as Kövecses ('Recent Developments in Metaphor Theory', in *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* vol. 9, no. 1 (2011), pp. 11-25) has pointed out, whereas the split between the two kinds of knowledge is sustained throughout metaphor processing and affects the reader's emotions, together with other literary phenomena. Finally, it is necessary to distinguish between blended spaces as linguistic expressions (such as in literary fantasies) and blending as a conceptual tool at work in metaphor processing.

## 6 Reading and Ritualising

Academic discourses have tended mostly to intellectualize and to repress the affective and somatic dimension of the reading encounter. However, reading happens not only at epidermic level, but ‘under the skin’, whenever readers live the reading experience in full engagement. I see reading as an unfolding event, to be considered as a social behavior and a creative action which needs to be foregrounded in its phenomenological and processual dimension.

Following a brief exposition of the cognitive and anthropological accounts of emotions, I provide an overview of three novels selected for their characteristic blending of fantasy and mimesis, and finally set out to do an ‘autoethnography’ of reading, a phenomenological case study. In ‘the reader’ section, which opens the ‘autoethnography’, I have included elements about my social and cultural backgrounds and my relation to reading, writing and literature, as well as hints at the environments I have interacted with in my life.

In the course of the chapter this observational practice and writing about my own experience as a reader of the chosen novels is clearly laid out in its anthropological foundations. I follow the lead of many anthropologists who, after the representational crisis in anthropology, have explored alternative modes of writing ethnographies. The list of names would be too long.<sup>137</sup>

However, the novelty is that I employ these explorative tools to account for my personal reading experience, rather than for an account of some hard fact ‘out there’ in the social arena. By doing this, I endeavour to offer an alternative reading of the process of reading itself, as an encounter where emotions hold a fundamental place, quite different from the abstraction and disembodiedness of much academic discourse. This is important in order to go beyond the Subject/Object divide that has been fostered throughout centuries of western scientific and academic discourse and has deformed our very perception of our embeddedness in processes which are both social and natural. My second intention is to account for the specificity of non-realistic fiction, whose blending of fantasy and mimesis needs to be underscored and analyzed in its subversive psychological function. In fact, throughout my work, I have made

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<sup>137</sup> For a full account of ‘the narrative turn’ and ‘ethnographic poetics and narratives of the self’ see Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography, Ethnographic Practices for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Thousand Oaks, London, New Dehli: Sage Publications, 1997). (The entire book, but especially pp. 199-228)

the case for the importance of what I call ‘hybrid fiction’ as a magical supplement to the reader’s life.

## 6.1 From Interpretation, through Affect, to the Social-Relational Dimension of Reading

English Professor and Comparatist Patrick Colm Hogan (2011) has drawn on the most recent cognitive studies in psychology in order to account for emotions, and show how literature can provide a body of data for their study and play a fundamental role in developing the reader’s empathy.<sup>138</sup> He distinguishes between ‘hedonic emotions’ (61) and ‘nonegoistic emotion’ (62) and, talking about empathy, he states:

A number of authors have suggested that the origin and ultimate grounding of ethics is found in empathy. [...] The fundamental source of nonegoistic emotion, by the preceding account, is almost necessarily the sensitivity to emotion expressions of others. That sensitivity is the first and most basic inclination that motivates us to act in ways not guided solely by our own emotional interests. In this way, the preceding account has a somewhat surprising implication. The basic sensitivities that form the groundwork for our ethical behavior are also the only emotion triggers that absolutely must be innate for us to be able to develop emotionally through critical period experiences. (62)

However, while there are ‘innate’ triggers that must be activated in order for empathy to unfold, the embodied and socio-relational dimension of the emotions needs to be emphasized more. In his account of ‘the neurological substrates of emotion or the underlying structural organization of our emotional architecture’, Hogan states:

First, there is the level of individual neurons, which may be specialized for different aspects of emotion initiation or response. Above this, there is the level of neuron populations, particularly those densely interconnected in emotionally specialized regions of functional neuroanatomy. These regions, are of course, not isolated, but linked with regions governing motor routines, attentional focus, autonomic nervous activity, and so on. We may refer to these large, interconnected networks as ‘systems’. Finally, above the level of systems, we have relations among systems. These relations may be

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<sup>138</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan, *What Literature Teaches us about Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

excitatory, inhibitory, or neutral. Moreover they may be symmetrical or asymmetrical. In other words, two systems may affect one another equally (symmetrical); alternatively, one system may arouse or inhibit the other more than the reverse. Our emotion terms [the words we use to describe and classify emotions] may isolate phenomena at the second or third level. In addition, our emotion terms are often ambiguous or vague with respect to these systems and relations among systems. Moreover, we invariably lack terms for some emotions. In part, this results from the possible idiosyncrasy of particular emotional episodes, with their potentially diverse populations of activated neurons. (71-2)

This account, while being in line with the last scientific findings, and pointing to the problem of ambiguous terminology when it comes to defining what emotion(s) (and feelings) are, only hints at the role of the body in experiencing emotions. According to this influential author, '*physiological outcomes may be the somatic substrate for what we experience as the phenomenological tone or feeling of an emotion*' (emphasis mine, 73).

If we turn to the anthropology of emotion, we find that for decades it has been 'construing' emotion(s) as 'cultural', due to a conflation of the concept of 'culture' and that of 'society' and what anthropologist Margot L. Lyon has defined as the 'ideational bias':

In constructionist treatments, emotion is generally understood in primarily ideational terms, that is as a cognitive or mental phenomenon that is subject to cultural production.<sup>139</sup>

Furthermore, the distinction between culture and society is helpful in order to unravel the problem of emotion. In this discussion, culture is to be intended as values, practices and customs, while society is made up of institutions and individuals, minds *and* bodies. The emphasis on the body and the mind is not misplaced if we think about the Foucauldian 'bio-power' that the institutionalization of bodies and minds is capable of wielding. A non-dualistic account of the problem of emotion has to explore the interconnections between social institutions, individuals and cultural values.

If we want to go past the old dualisms of nature and culture, or innatism and nurture, emotion has to be considered as a 'force', yielding a kind of power. According to Lyon, an

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<sup>139</sup> Margot L. Lyon, 'Missing Emotion: The Limitations of Cultural Constructionism in the Study of Emotion', in *Cultural Anthropology* 10(2) (1995), pp. 244-63 (here p. 248).

expanded understanding of emotion must take account of the body *qua* body not simply as it is mediated by 'mind' but as part of the conception of emotion itself. Such an approach need *not* give priority to an innate biology of being. Biologies themselves are socialized, as Mauss, for example, so clearly showed in his account of 'techniques of the body' (1973 [1935]). (256)

In her account, 'emotion cannot be conceived as entirely separate from either psychophysiological or social phenomena' (257):

An important implication of a truly social-relational perspective on emotion is to see not only how emotion has social consequences, but how social relations themselves may generate emotion. Emotion has a social ontology. That is, the experience of emotion, which involves both physical and phenomenal dimensions, has also a social-relational genesis. And, what is subject to social relations is not merely cognitive faculties, but living human bodies, for society is also bodies in relation. (258)

In taking onboard both Hogan's and Lyon's perspectives on the cognitive processes, and the social dimension of emotion respectively, I would like to underline the psychophysical and embodied dimension of reading, as generating and releasing emotion as a kind of magical force. In the preceding chapters, following anthropologists like Tambiah and Glucklich<sup>140</sup>, I have defined magic as both a rhetorical art and a mode of consciousness accessible to all human beings. In this chapter, I observe and report my reading experience as a contribution towards an anthropology of literature that attempts to uncover the affective and embodied dimension of the the *encounter* between reader and text and, partly, its author: in fact, contrary to dogmatic interpretations of Barthes' statement about the 'author' and his 'death', it is possible to hold a middle ground, endorsed by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*:

the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate *absolutely*. He uses them only by letting himself, after a fashion and *up to a point*, be governed by the system. And the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands *and* what what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. (apart from the first two instances, the emphasis is mine)<sup>141</sup>

<sup>140</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *The End of Magic* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1997).

<sup>141</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), here p. 158.



In Seán Burke's succinct statement, 'though the dominion of intention is to be rigorously refused, intention itself is not thereby cancelled but *rather lodged within a broader signifying process*'.<sup>142</sup>

Indeed I suggest that the 'reader', considered as body, mind, emotions and (con)text, should be looked at as an active part within this 'broader signifying process'.

When I first selected the three novels for this project—*L'Iguana* by Anna Maria Ortese, *Die Vermessung der Welt* by Daniel Kehlmann and *Lanark* by Alasdair Gray—I knew they would seem quite unrelated to each other in terms of structure, themes and style. Instead, what connected them in my perception was their ironical stance towards their objects, coupled with an intense feeling for possible alternative visions about history and a deeply original sense both of the harshness or drudgery of the economic compartmentalization and rationalization of modern life, and of the possibilities of the imagination. Indeed the tension between utopia and dystopia or between order and chaos in these novels is their overarching, albeit protean, characteristic.

The first time I read each one of them, the impressions I received were varied and complex. During my second reading, I came to recognize these texts as some of the focal points in my reading experience, as my personal and social history on one hand, and the characteristics of the texts on the other hand interacted and impinged on each other, bringing about effects and epiphanies that would have not been such, had these two variables been different.

Indeed, I am supporting the idea of bringing back emotions into the process of reading, as a fundamental element towards what Susan Sontag in 'Against Interpretation' ([1964] 1983: 95-104) calls an 'erotics of art', and also as a fundamental basis to processes of comprehension, intellectualization and experiential appropriation of art. In the same essay, Susan Sontag states that 'interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.'<sup>143</sup> Sontag refers precisely to the disembodied intellectualizing characteristic of academia. However, following the narrative turn, based on the fundamental premise that all kinds of representation are always a secondary or even tertiary phenomenon because they are inevitably mediated by the ethnographer-author,

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<sup>142</sup> Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author, Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, second ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, [1992], 1998), here p. 140.

<sup>143</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 98.

interpretation needs not be seen in this way any longer; rather, it can be part and parcel of a holistic and multidimensional project, whereby the reader and the text communicate through a permeable membrane.

As Bruno Bettelheim argues in his *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), children know, when they read a fairy-tale that it is both real and not real.<sup>144</sup> In what I call 'hybrid fictions', both a child-like and a new, forward-looking self-awareness is fostered through a spiral-like reading process, whereby memories, thoughts, sudden associations, quirks and details all intervene and contribute to the unique processual experience of reading.

A long time has elapsed since Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) admonished scholars against the 'affective fallacy':

The Affective Fallacy is a confusion between the poem and its results... It begins by trying to derive the standard of criticism from the psychological effects of the poem and ends in impressionism and relativism.<sup>145</sup>

On the other hand, Wolfgang Iser has more recently spoken in *The Act of Reading* (1978: 61) of 'the quality of performance' inherent in the reading experience, and in *Prospecting: from Reader-Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989), he states:

A second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first. The reasons for this may lie in the reader's own change of circumstances, but all the same, the text must be such as to permit this variation. [...] The increased information that now overshadows the text provides possibilities of combination that were obscured in the first reading. Familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at times enriched. But for all that, nothing is formulated in the text itself, rather, the reader himself produces these innovative readings. (10)

While I agree with Iser's position regarding the active role of the reader in performing and producing various readings, I affirm that the reader *encounters* the text emotionally and intellectually by means of stylized emotions that the writer has encoded in the text. In this way, the experience of literature is profoundly ethical because it is based on intersubjective communication. Reading a literary novel is a dialogue whereby the reader encounters alterity

<sup>144</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

<sup>145</sup> W. K. Wimsatt, and M. C. Beardsley, 'The affective fallacy.' In *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 21-39 (here p. 21).

both inside and outside herself. In order to be truly ethical and intersubjective, an encounter must not subsume the other into the self, but must allow for their reciprocal otherness. The literary text's performativity enables a defamiliarizing dialogue whereby intersubjectivity and subjectivity enhance each other. I also find necessary to underscore that, in the words of Miall (2007: 53), 'feeling plays the primary role in directing the reading of literary narratives.'<sup>146</sup>

Before pursuing my emotions as a reader, it is necessary to give information about the novels themselves: what follows is an overview of the novels for the benefit of those readers who do not know them at all or read them some time ago.

## 6.2 Overview of the Novels

### 6.2.1 *The Iguana, or the phenomenology of oppression.*

In *The Iguana*, which was first published in Italy in 1965, the author Anna Maria Ortese sets out to depict her personal vision of Nature, conceived as an elemental yet inarticulated force, and its mysterious power.<sup>147</sup> Nature encompasses humanity, yet the pure natural is a condition of abjection and brutality. Men, on the other hand, oppress and persecute natural creatures. Facts and events, the narrator seems to say, are rarely what they seem to be at first and their innermost reason is most mysterious and impossible to grasp. The Iguana is both a degraded woman and an animal, 'a beast': she is the embodiment of the oppressed and what Ortese calls 'the little ones of the earth'.<sup>148</sup>

Aleardo, alias Daddo, Count of Milan, sets out to sea in order to look for new lands to buy, and also, to comply with a friend's request (a publisher's), to find new juicy stories for Milan's thriving publishing industry. Although he is described as not very intelligent, Daddo has both the qualities of a good 'Lombardo': a practical mind, and a compassionate heart. At the very start, when his friend Adelchi asks him for something new to publish, Daddo says: 'Ci

<sup>146</sup> David S. Miall, *Literary Reading, Empirical and Theoretical Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

<sup>147</sup> Anna Maria Ortese, *L'Iguana*, 8<sup>th</sup> edn (Milano Adelphi: 2007); *The Iguana*, trans. by Henry Martin (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 1987).

<sup>148</sup> Anna Maria Ortese, 'La libertà è un respiro', *Corpo Celeste* (Milano: Adelphi, 1997), pp. 107-33.

vorrebbero le confessioni di un qualche pazzo, magari innamorato di un'iguana'. (*L'Iguana*, 2007: 17): 'What you need are the confessions of some madman, how about the story of a madman in love with an iguana?' (*The Iguana*, 1987: 3) The themes of disease and animalism emerge in connection with what Adelchi calls 'qualche poema, qualche canto, [...] dove si esprima la rivolta dell'oppresso' (2007: 17): 'a series of cantos expressing the revolt of the oppressed' (1987: 4), a topic capable of attracting the public's attention in its search for exotica and sensationalism.

However, once Daddo and his captain Salvato sail beyond Gibraltar, they reach a forlorn and almost abandoned little island, named Ocaña, where three brothers and a little creature, an iguana, live in poverty and decadence. Two of the Segovia-Guzman brothers are rough and inhospitable; the third is a frail young Marquis—Don Ilario—whom extreme poverty and disease have made old before his time. This young man welcomes Daddo with some enthusiasm into his ruined mansion. Daddo, however, in his goodness would like to do something to relieve everybody's condition, particularly that of the sensitive Marquis and of the little iguana, as tall as a child, that at first Daddo takes to be a frail elderly woman. He soon realizes she is not old, but dejected and overworked, and falls in love with her. She is also the centrepiece of a family mystery that Daddo tries to make sense of: she is mistreated and hated by all the brothers. Daddo also realises the Marquis' alienated condition by discovering that he was once deeply in love with a little monkey, named Perdita (Loss). He then discovers the iguana's den in the cellar below his own room and is displeased when he sees that the iguana collects mock-money in the form of coloured pebbles received by the brothers for her domestic services. After dinner, the Count goes back to his room, but being unable to fall asleep, he stays on the balcony observing the moon. In the moonlight he witnesses a profound and disturbing metamorphosis in the Marquis, who appears younger and radiant and is sumptuously clothed, looking his own image in a mirror. He and his brothers, also transformed, leave the house to reach the beach. Daddo looks for the iguana and finds her in the henhouse, where the brothers have locked her. He ends up proposing to her, after blaming her for her avarice, but she declines his offer.

In the meanwhile, on the beach, the brothers welcome new guests, the 'typical' little family of the Hopins and an archbishop, who has made a match between the Hopins' daughter and Don Ilario, hoping to gain the island for

himself; together they enter the house and Daddo sees them while they try to exorcise the spirit of evil in the little cellar where the iguana lives. The latter comes back from the henhouse and fat Mrs Hopins is so afraid that she faints. Thus the prospective marriage is still uncertain. Daddo goes to sleep but cannot rest. Later he comes to know that once the Marquis had loved the iguana tenderly but now he would rather forget the past in order to lead a comfortable life.

The day after, Daddo meets Don Ilario on the beach and tries to persuade him not to sell himself. He offers him his help, asks to see his many poems and offers to see to with their publication in Milan. A philosophical dialogue takes place between the two about reality, good and evil and death. When the bishop comes by, Don Ilario flees away perplexed, and Daddo recognizes the bishop as an old acquaintance.

The iguana, who was once loved and cherished by the Marquis, has now been repudiated as the very embodiment of the 'devil'. Daddo gathers his money with the aim of helping the Marquis or the poor iguana, but Salvato, whom the Hopins' maid has informed about everything, makes us infer that the iguana's secret is simple and terrible at the same time. At this point Daddo's state of mind changes abruptly. Between dream and reality, he sees the iguana sweeping the floor and talking about a paradise which is forbidden to her. The Count is moved and offers her all his money, but the iguana just goes away.

When the marriage between the Marquis and the young Hopins girl is secured, Daddo asks him for an explanation of the iguana's deep pain, but Ilario answers by bringing in the topic of trade unions and the fact that the iguana had not joined in, so that she could not claim any further economic refund or pay. His cynicism and the different plains on which the two young men place the reasons of the iguana's discontent make Daddo hallucinate and confuse reality and dream again. Indeed the reader and the narrator themselves are not sure what reality is and what is dream either. Soon, Daddo feels that this cynical aspect of Ilario's personality is a 'fantastic' mask and he is suddenly near the well, together with the Guzman brothers, where they fear that the iguana has committed suicide.

Now the Count realises that the iguana is not an iguana, but a poor maid, a girl reduced to an animal-like state by poverty and ignorance. Another sudden change of scene leads Daddo, and the reader, into Ilario's study, where he talks

about the death of God at the hands of a killer who has fled somewhere. The Count looks for this killer and soon takes part in his own trial for the murder of God, a huge, white butterfly, who nonetheless is still alive. The unaware killer, the Count himself, is finally absolved, as the real killer is the economic power and money he is capable of wielding. Daddo is again at the very bottom of the well, where he has jumped in order to save the iguana. He saves her, but he wakes up in his bed, wrapped up in bandages, close to death. He realises that his real voyage starts with death itself.

After Daddo's death, Don Ilario leaves as a married man, while the brothers Guzman and the iguana stay on the island, which has been transformed into a tourist resort. However, the island is as bleak and as windy as ever and does not cater for the bourgeoisie's taste. The brothers and the iguana, though, help each other in learning to read and write. Only the iguana-girl has not enough concentration to learn, so that the two Guzman write a prayer to Christ and the Count in order to please her and to be remembered and acknowledged. The iguana no longer loves the Marquis but the Count, whose sacrifice has saved her life and given her serenity and the hope of a new resurrection.

However the question remains, to what extent has the Iguana become a self-aware subject? She remains on the margins of an unconscious life, forever on the border between bestiality and humanity, a perfect hybrid condition.

*The Iguana* articulates the themes of disease and of what constitutes a beast or a human being; together the two converge in giving an account of the phenomenology of oppression. In fact the Count is ill because of unconsciousness, while Ilario, although himself oppressed, ill and melancholic, also exercises his own power over the iguana-girl, whose degree of oppression is such that she, as victim, does not even exist as a conscious and self-aware (human) being. The central statement of the novel is the following:

e, insomma, I Lombardi avevano per certo che un mondo oppresso abbia qualcosa da dire, mentre, se l'oppressione è antica e autentica, l'oppresso non esiste neppure, o non ha più coscienza di esserlo, ma solo esiste, sebbene senza una vera coscienza, l'oppressore, che a volte, per vezzo, simula i modi che sarebbero legittimi della vittima, se ancora esistesse. (*L'Iguana*, 2007: 18)

Briefly put, the Milanese were persuaded that some world of oppression had something to say, whereas the oppressed don't even exist, or can't, at least have any awareness of being oppressed when their condition is authentic and a legacy from a distant past. The only

thing left is the oppressor, who likewise has no knowledge of what he is, even while sometimes, out of habit, aping the stances and behaviour that would legitimately befit his victim, if any such victim had escaped extinction. (*The Iguana*, 1987: 4)

Technically, *The Iguana* can be defined as self-reflexive magical realism, in that in its combination, without privileging any, of different planes and accounts of reality, it also exposes its internal narrative strategies. Is Daddo becoming crazy? Yet, his madness is not explained away or reduced to silence; indeed it is the restoring point of a degree of coherence in a reality that to him, and to the reader up to that point, appears ungraspable. The very categories of sanity and madness are reversed. The fact that at the end the iguana is revealed to be a girl, who had been reduced to beastly state by abjection, poverty and pain does not explain things. Furthermore, the iguana is ensnared in a black magic of fear and pain, a spell which only a sacrifice, a death, can break.

The status of 'reality' and what is 'fantastic' are being questioned in their own assumptions: they increasingly appear to be the same thing, as the narrator deliberately denies knowing any more than the reader does and leaves him/her in a state of confusion and perplexity.

*L'iguana* is a text where the ontological opposition of 'reality' and fantastic dimension is overcome by the bridging perception of an overarching strangeness, that very 'stranezza del reale' Ortese talks about in her non-fictional texts and is highlighted by the vague reference to Unamuno at the end of the novel. Her definition of the real is given by Daddo himself: realism should be

'un'arte di illuminare il reale. Purtroppo, non si tiene conto che il reale è a più strati, e l'intero Creato, quando si è giunti ad analizzare sin l'ultimo strato, non risulta affatto reale, ma pura e profonda immaginazione' (2007: 60)

'an art of illuminating the real. But people, unfortunately, don't always affirm the awareness that reality exists on many levels, and that the whole of creation, once you analyse the deepest levels of reality, isn't real at all, and simply the purest and profoundest imagination.' (1987: 52)

Ortese moves past the psychological definition of the fantastic as a moment of psychological uncertainty in front of an apparently irrational event,

and transfers the uncertainty onto the formal, narrative plane, that is, on the way the novel is constructed. If we accept Marie-Anne Rubat Du Merac's<sup>149</sup> hypothesis of the novel's extra-diegetic narrator as a double of the protagonist Daddo, another epistemological and interpretative frame comes to mind: the space and time of narration are the narrator's inner space and time, which means that *The Iguana* develops as an account of an inexplicable inner experience too.

The reader knows from the start that Daddo is already bent on meeting and falling in love with an iguana, as his friend's request for a sensational poem to be marketed in Milan makes clear. What if the mysterious narrator is really a double, a 'spectre' of the Count, trying to make sense of his experience? In that case the space of narration is itself uncanny and it is constructed by bringing together either repetitive or contradictory events. The act of telling the story is uncanny in itself. At this point, the novel takes on a wider significance: a Jungian perspective helps identify the iguana with the archetype of the 'anima', with whom the Count falls in love to the point of dying for her: something primordial and forgotten comes back, pervading the Count's memory and very being, asking for his acknowledgement and love.

The iguana is a reptile, a watery and chthonic creature at the same time, both elements being related to the feminine: that which is encompassing and not differentiated, and whose power of attraction brings about death for the Count and only half a redemption/recognition for the iguana herself. She never actually emancipates herself. Self-awareness can only be the result of an act of existential pondering on one's own condition, followed by emancipation and later integration of the raw power of the feminine. This, however, cannot happen in the novel. In fact, the final 'canto of the oppressed' is written by the Guzman brothers; the iguana, we are told, is not able to concentrate and learn to read and write. This is the end: something which does not belong to 'normality' has been revealed and brought to light, even cherished and loved, but nonetheless, it can never be fully acknowledged, without bringing about ruin and displacement, because it has its place *outside* human order.

On the other hand, *The Iguana* is also the account of a collective experience, the experience of western cultures, of the direction they have

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<sup>149</sup> Marie-Anne Rubat Du Merac, 'L'iguana d'Anna Maria Ortese: un exemple de fantastique féminin?' In *Les Femmes Ecrivains en Italie aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Aix-en-Provence, Nov. 1993: Uni de Provence), 191-204.



taken, inasmuch as in their rationalizing and reifying discourses they have repressed their connection to nature, the borderline and mystery, and their fear of death. Now all these come back, haunting the Count (and the reader) as ghosts, making for that uncanny feeling of strange familiarity and familiar strangeness that turns the Count into the very double of himself, as a narrator. This is a possible interpretation only if we overcome the divide between rational and irrational, or realistic and fantastic: in the words of one of Ortese's characters in *Alonso e i Visionari*, 'the whole of reality is supernatural'. That is, conversely, all is real.

The theme of the double recurs throughout *The Iguana*, as the Count and the Marquis seem to be different instances of each other, and later the Marquis himself undergoes a night metamorphosis into a sumptuous and beautiful youth, and a day metamorphosis into 'the terrible Mendez', which is also Daddo's alienated projection of himself as an oppressor. Their destinies are also the inversion of each other's: the Marquis will go into a state of bourgeois tranquillity, while Daddo will find death in the attempt to pay for his previous unconscious tranquillity in Milan, and ignorance of the economic laws of the world, of which he is nonetheless a perpetrator.

Thus *The Iguana*, can be read on different levels. On one hand, it is the account of an individual and an epochal experience, in which the iguana-girl is a subaltern in the sense outlined by Spivak, in that at the end of the novel it is clear that she can never speak and represent herself. On the other hand, she is representative of a whole collective dimension repressed within western culture too, a border whose trespass is a taboo. Once its nature comes to light, the uncanny quality of the 'real' is fore-grounded, and the shifting inner frontier of colonialism, of what is central and what is marginal in the geography of the human heart gets exposed in its ambiguity. Ortese thus exposes the difficult and unsolvable problem of how Daddo, the western subject, can learn to locate himself as 'other' rather than as always positing Otherness in contrast to himself.

### **6.2.2 Lanark: A Life in Four Books**

As the title states, *Lanark* is 'a life in four books', being the story of the eponymous hero in two different lives or, possibly, a life on earth and a descent

into hell, the former described according to the conventions of realism (the hero is called Duncan Thaw and is loosely based on Gray's autobiographical memories as a young man), the latter being fantastical (the hero's name is now Lanark).<sup>150</sup> It is worth noting that the novel begins with the fantastical narrative, which serves as the frame around the realistic narrative. In fact, as the author himself in the 'Epilogue' says, *Lanark* is 'divided into books three, one, two and four' (*Lanark* 2007: 483), number three and four containing Lanark's adventures and books one and two, in the middle, being his life as Duncan Thaw in the city of Glasgow. Apparently, the reason for this strange arrangement is that Gray wants *Lanark* 'to be read in one order but eventually thought of in another' (*Lanark* 2007: 483).

Lanark ends up in the grimy city of Unthank, where he develops a skin condition called dragon-hide in the novel, other people develop other strange illnesses, such as having speaking mouths on their hands. All these conditions depend on the spiritual conditions the people are in: dragon-hide, for example, is the illness of those who are self-enclosed and unable to love others. These metaphors of alienation have a strong estranging effect, while also arousing the reader's curiosity.

When Lanark realizes he is in hell (46) he prays for a way out and at the top of a hill a mouth appears saying 'I am the way out' (47). Lanark has to enter the mouth 'Naked, and head first' (47). It is interesting that Lanark enters through a mouth, rather than a door, signifying that he is being literally digested, an allusion to the Freudian 'oral stage' of development, and to the fact that the world Lanark lives in is characterised by greed and harsh limitation.

This way he lands into the Institute, a strange sort of place, a mixture of hospital and laboratory, where he is cured of dragon-hide and becomes himself a doctor helping a dragon, whom he recognizes as his girlfriend Rima at a late stage of the disease, to recover her human form. When she is healed, he decides to leave the Institute with her and look for a city where the sun shines. However, before they manage to leave the Institute, they discover that people who are affected by these strange diseases and cannot be healed disappear: they either become food or explode and provide fuel for the Institute and the Council, the two profit-making institutions which govern and lead the city of Unthank. In this part of the novel Gray criticises the capitalist economic system

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<sup>150</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007).

by using the conventions of dystopian fiction, thus amplifying and metaphorically reworking the worst traits of capitalism.

At this point book three is over and a ‘prologue’ is introduced, telling the story of the oracle which is going to tell Lanark his life as Duncan Thaw, as a boy and art student in Glasgow in the sixties. This story is the subject matter of books one and two, the former telling of Thaw’s childhood, while the latter deals with his life as a young man. Books one and two are divided by the interlude, where the oracle tells Lanark more about his life as Thaw. This realistic narrative has the function of anchoring the critique of capitalism to a specific location and time, and also serves as a seemingly factual narrative of an ordinary life, which leads inevitably to Lanark’s plight.

As the ‘Table of Contents’ at the very beginning points out, the ‘interlude’ is in fact written ‘to remind us what we are in danger of forgetting: that Thaw’s story exists within the hull of Lanark’s’. The fourth and last book resumes the narrative of Lanark’s adventures within the meanders of the Council, his passage through the intercalendrical zone, where he and Rima wander through different time dimensions in the attempt to reach Unthank and eventually Provan—a town where the sun shines, but they come across people who are demonstrating against the Council and the Institute. Lord Monboddie is the president of the Creature, an institution that joins the Council and the Institute together, and gives a speech which is the apotheosis of the hyper-capitalist society, with its system of research institutes, and foundations for the advancement of science and ultimately for profiting a few powerful tycoons.

After Lanark and Rima’s separation and the political assembly in Provan, where Lanark is to go as a delegate from Greater Unthank, Gray inserts an ‘epilogue’ which is meta-fictional and revelatory of the overall design of the novel. Here Lanark meets the author, who tells him he has to be a failure in order to please the readers who identify with him. Lanark exits the epilogue banging the door. There follows the climax, where he and his son Alexander walk uphill and Lanark has his moment of glorious epiphany while basking in the sun and looking at Alexander. In the last page of the novel, Lanark is approached by an uncanny chamberlain sent by the ‘ministry of the earth’, announcing the imminent time of Lanark’s death. In the end, Lanark is ‘a slightly worried, ordinary old man but glad to see the light in the sky’ (560).

If we don't follow Gray's advice about mentally re-arranging Lanark's two lives in chronological order, we choose to be entangled in the text in a rather chaotic way, where the allegorical element is being amplified in both narrative directions: the hero's two lives are *figurae* and mirrors of each other, they may be thought of not only in sequence but simultaneously. This can have a mind-boggling effect, in that the reader is transported through different layers of explanation, from the causal to the synchronic, where the world as we know it is shown as deeply uncanny and unfamiliar, where everything is the reverse side of everything else.

In the case of *The Iguana* and *Lanark* we are confronted with symbolic texts which try to found an alternative mythology, as 'situation', which is both individual and paradigmatic, but that makes space for the uncanny quality of reality and storytelling, as the authors recognize the displacement of what they describe as a necessary condition for the decolonization of the unknown and foreign realm of the 'real'. In *The Iguana*, Ortese depicts 'reality' as a broken mirror full of contradictions and alternatives. Her conception of an ungraspable world of meanings stages difference and otherness as constitutionally inscribed in the world and in the text. On the other hand, in *Lanark* the insubstantiality of the written text and the material import of the book as an object are interwoven through such powerful metaphors that abstractions functioning as fetishes end up exploding and displaying their figural status. The difference or *différance*, in Derrida's terms, opened up in the symbolic text is exactly the blank left by the non-identity of name and thing named:

a 'text' is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far [...].<sup>151</sup>

Indeed *The Iguana* and *Lanark* play out this ghostly, uncanny space of displaced identities employing the device of the double as their supplement. Robert Louis Stevenson is a model both for Gray and Ortese; not only the characters' identities but also the fictional spaces are a doubling of the

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<sup>151</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Living On', trans. by James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom *et al.*, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 75-176 (here p. 84).

geographical ones. The reading process becomes in itself an amplification of this continuous displacement.

Although my standpoint is phenomenological, it also is process-oriented, in a way which cannot countenance Husserl's transcendental ego. For this reason I welcome Derrida's notion of *différance* as the irruption of non-being and otherness at the very core of presence, but extend it in a cybernetic direction. In fact, even more than Derrida's continuous deferral of the end, Bateson's cybernetic idea of 'difference' is particularly suited to account for the dynamics of reading these texts. In fact, as we have seen in section 3.1.2, the cybernetic unit of information is 'a difference which makes a difference' and, as such, allows us to conceive the gap between two phenomena as a re-instatement of productive and creative otherness. Later, in my 'autoethnography of reading' I endeavour to show how the texts being read feed into a continuous, holistic, metamorphic and differential fiction of the self.

### 6.2.3 Measuring the World

In the case of *Measuring the World* (*Die Vermessung der Welt*, 2005), we are dealing with a movement in the opposite direction: the deconstruction of science and idealism unfolds by demythologizing the situation in which they arose: in fact they are both part of the same enterprise in the Subject/Object formation in the sciences and academic discourses of the time, which, by the end of the nineteenth century, together with an increasing rationalization of industrial production, contributed to the reification of human relationships, as well as of those between humanity and the rest of the natural realm.<sup>152</sup>

While lavishing irony on the mystical leanings of German Romantic culture, Kehlmann's novel also traces a satirical genealogy of the split consciousness of modernity, tracking it back to the Enlightenment ideals of the Kantian enterprise and its aftermath. Yet, as in *The Iguana* and *Lanark*, the logic of the supplement is still there: the parallel lives of the two protagonists—two great German scientists, Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Friedrich Gauss, who met in 1828 in Berlin at the German Scientific Congress—supplement each other, without being able to integrate what they lack in different ways. The

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<sup>152</sup> Daniel Kehlmann, *Die Vermessung der Welt* (Hamburg, Rowohlt: 2005); *Measuring the World*, trans. By Carol Brown Janeway (London: Quercus, 2007).

women in Gauss's life are a supplement of each other: neither Nina, the prostitute, nor his first wife Johanna, nor his second wife Minna are allowed to be 'original', they are made into replicas of a conventional idea of woman, as either prostitute or wife. Although Gauss at a certain point thinks of marrying Nina, he is soon led back to 'reason' and propriety, and instead of marrying her, he promises to learn her language, as a supplement of faithfulness. Johanna herself is aware that a life with Gauss means being turned into a ghost; nonetheless she ends up accepting his proposal and losing her own voice accordingly. All we know about her personality comes from before marriage to Gauss; afterwards she is lost in silence.

*Die Vermessung der Welt* deals in a satirical tone with Humboldt's and Gauss' attempts at making sense of reality through science. By wanting to measure all the physical phenomena in the world, and advancing respectively mathematics and geography, Humboldt and Gauss go through life 'insulated'. Their inclination towards measurements and numbers, quantification and natural laws, helps them exorcise their fear of the unknown, the feminine, mystery and death. The other great theme of the book, however, is precisely 'death' and the uncanny dimension of life, that 'other side' that they stubbornly refuse to acknowledge. And yet, ghosts and the realm of the dead are familiar realities from the beginning of the novel.

Since his childhood, Humboldt has been acquainted with ghosts in the castle where he lives, and his decision to become an explorer is from the start determined by the ominous story of Crazy Aguirre, who proclaimed himself king in the midst of the impenetrable Amazonian regions, and led his men to certain death. During his expeditions later in life, Humboldt always draws a line when the uncanny threatens to shatter his Kantian vision of reality. This happens, for example, when he and his companion Bonpland descend into the Cave of the Dead and he sees his dead mother, then when sailing on the Orinoco river, where the reflections of dead birds are mirrored in the waters, and finally while trying to climb Mount Chimborazo, where Humboldt is hallucinating about the faithful dog he placed in a cage with crocodiles in order to observe their behaviour.

In all these cases (which are depicted in the fourth, sixth and eighth chapters respectively), Humboldt decides to go back when threatened by chaos and unknown possible dangers, and yet, all the while, he goes on collecting

plants, animals and insects, mostly dead, and fragments of rocks, measuring air pressure and other physical phenomena. Gauss on the other hand does not think that it is necessary to explore the world in order to be a scientist. He is a mathematician, who after his best work on mathematics, knows he will never be able to outdo himself, and ends up measuring only land and studying astronomy mostly for economical reasons. He marries, but his treatment of women is indifferent. He loves Nina best, the Russian prostitute that he will never marry. His two wives, Johanna and Minna are voiceless.

Humboldt has never loved a woman; he lives in his own world of measurements. The only women both men feel for are their respective mothers, as the source of comfort and consolation. Both are depicted as devoted to them, Gauss even more than Humboldt, as he thinks of her on all uncomfortable occasions.

The author's irony is a good distancing tool that both shows the two men's limits and also makes space for the subtle treatment of the underground theme which flows throughout the novel like a subterranean river, that of the uncanny dimension of life and reality, which the two protagonists try to ban from their own lives.

Magical realist elements, such as ghosts and communication with the dead, crop up in the texture of the novel at strategic points: always opening up a chance for the protagonist to acknowledge and deepen his understanding of the 'other' dimension. It is as if all the time, the unconscious, with its reservoir of mysterious elements and events, is being repressed through the act of measuring distances and star courses, and collecting samples and evidence of physical phenomena, that most of the time involve killing animals and insects for science's sake. The deadness of 'facts' and the abstract dimension which this cold factuality helps construct is at the base of that epistemological enterprise we call 'science'. In other words, Humboldt and Gauss try to understand and contain natural phenomena by imprisoning them in a safe net of numbers and measurements.

At a certain point, Humboldt sets a pet dog in a crocodile's cage in order to observe the latter's hunting habits. Later on the remorse for the horrible death of the loyal dog haunts him, yet he justifies his misdeed as necessary for the advancement of science. The dog continues to appear as a ghost. This is the

birth certificate of the violence upon which modern technological and scientific society is predicated, a 'necessary' violence for the progress of humankind.

On the other hand, Gauss has little consideration for women and his own family: he is alienated both from his two wives and his children, particularly his son Eugen, whom he sees as not particularly intelligent and not a bit gifted for mathematics. Eugen loves poetry and trees; he ends up in a prison because he finds himself in a subversive gathering of students in Berlin and in the end Humboldt, as a favour to Gauss, obtains his freedom but cannot avoid his exile. Eugen is shipped to America, and the moment he realizes that new possibilities await him and that the coast of America before his eyes is no chimera, but reality, the novel comes to an end. This open-ended conclusion—with the young generation about to turn a new page in the book of history, as America is the land of new opportunity and fresh starts—is an elusive commentary on the ghostly, old European civilization as embodied in the likes of Gauss and Humboldt.

Throughout the novel, Humboldt's exotic feats are counterpoised to Gauss' s dull life back home, in a country that appears to Gauss as non-existent, made up only of forests and little villages. In spite of the diversity of their experiences, both Gauss and Humboldt are always somewhat unreal. Gauss realizes this for himself in a moment of bitter reflection, while in Amazonia, a native looking into Humboldt's hand sees 'no past, no present, no future': he is really 'nobody'. Throughout the story, maps and mathematical formulas cover up precariously the fragile and incomprehensible core of life, they give structure to Humboldt and Gauss' lives, but these men appear all the more impoverished as human beings.

Europe and Germany itself are not any more real than Amazonia or Russia; whether Gauss measures German forests and lands or Humboldt explores the Orinoco or crosses the Russian steppe, it does not make a big difference: the unreality they have forced nature into comes back with a vengeance and turns on them. Berlin too is a threatening place for them. While Humboldt gets stuck into the mundane side of science, conferences and academies and encounters with princes, Gauss' misanthropic views embitter him more and more. He only likes the young physicist Weber, whom he deems clever enough to converse with. Eugen does not even receive a last letter from his father. Albeit full of old-fashioned advice, the last letter Eugen receives is Humboldt's.



Looking at the novel in order to define its magical realism, it can be remarked that the supernatural always works humorously against commonsense as a counterpoint. The author is always very careful not to overdo it; rather he employs irony in order to allow a reflective and playful distance among the depiction of the protagonists' weaknesses, the inexplicable they face and the readers' apprehension of it. In spite of humour, readers are made aware of a serious undercurrent, a chilling watery dimension, which comes up here and there and threatens a commonsense perception of life. Water and trees are recurring elements in the novel, whether as rivers or sea and forests or gardens. Likewise, caves frequently recur. These images can be identified as archetypal, wherein contact with the numinous and otherworldly dimension can be made. However, only Eugen is capable of establishing such a contact without withdrawing, when he leans onto the ancient big tree in Tenerife. Gauss and Humboldt always deny or discount their experiences of the uncanny side of nature and life.

*Die Vermessung der Welt* is philosophical and magical realist at the same time: these two dimensions are woven together throughout the narrative with light irony. The philosophical German tradition is intensely interrogated, the Romantic shadows of Goethe, Schiller, and the Schlegel brothers project themselves in the background as influences on Humboldt's education, while Kant is portrayed as an old, almost idiotic man, whose conception of space Gauss contradicts: to the Euclidean abstract space of points and parallels he denies any reality. To him space is 'folded, bent, and extremely strange' (Kehlmann, 2007: 80). Yet, for all his insight into the complexity of nature, he is frustrated in his attempt at communication and sharing. He becomes a land surveyor because he has no better chances left.

Gauss and Humboldt do not have a real sense of belonging to Germany: Gauss admires Napoleon, while Humboldt considers Paris, not Berlin, his home. Germany is yet in the making, far from being a nation, far from being a reality. It exists only in the hopes of the subversive students who meet in underground cellars in Berlin. The magical elements that crop up in the text have to do with a mythical dimension, both of Germany and Amazonia: whether the German Urwald or in the Amazonian rain forest, they are places where primeval darkness rules.

### 6.3 Deeper and Deeper I Dive...

In the following, I engage with the reading of these texts as a process, which springs from my changing disposition as a specific reader over time and those characteristics fore-grounded in the novels. What I do here is called ‘autoethnography’ in anthropology, but, rather than reflecting on some personal experience ‘out there’ in the social arena, I reflect on the very personal, and yet social experience of reading, aiming at overcoming the opposition between ‘personal’ and ‘social’. Ultimately, reading, even when taking place privately, is always social or communal. I find some of Denzin’s sociological definitions of autoethnography useful for clarification and provide them below (section 6.4), but I am inclined to recast autoethnography through the anthropological lens provided by Barbara Tedlock in the quote I cited on pages 44-5, wherein process and encounter are the most important aspects to take into consideration in the autoethnographic narrative.

The other divide I intend to debunk is that between theory and praxis: reading is both at the same time. I attempt to show anthropology of literature in the making – both as theoretical discourse and an ethnographic practice – by focusing on reading as an interactive process or encounter. In the preceding chapters I argued that something different from catharsis and mere entertainment happens when someone reads a subversive hybrid fiction: here I engage in what I call ritualised reading.

### 6.4 Reading and the ‘Sting of Memory’

In *Interpretive Ethnography* (1997), Norman K. Denzin describes different ‘ethnographic practices for the twenty-first century’, emphasising that

Ethnography has crossed the liminal space that separates the scholarly text from its performance. The text is now given back to those to whom it has always belonged –the reader, the other, who finds in these texts parts of themselves and parts of others just like them. We are all co-performers in our own and others’ lives. (123)

It is my intention to blend two of these ethnographic practices in the present chapter, the ‘mystory’ and ‘ethnographic poetics’, through which I explore my

experience of reading the three novels concerned here. I thus engage in autoethnography:

*Autoethnography*: Traditionally, ‘the cultural study of one’s own people’ (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 106; see also Hayano, 1979, 1982), but more recently a turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur (see Ellis, 1996). (Denzin: 1997, 227, n. 3)

While the ‘mystory’ is usually written to be performed or read by anthropologists or sociologists in the presence of an audience, I use it here together with ethnographic poetics and personal narrative in order to recover some of its performative character and show its potential for exploring the reading ‘encounter’. Here are the characteristics of the ‘mystory’:

The mystory is simultaneously a personal mythology, a public story and a performance that critiques. [...] Of course, the mystory text is not easily constructed. It involves the hard interpretive work of editing personal, biographical reality (Jackson, 1993, p. 26; Mc Call & Becker, 1990, p. 118). Editing biographical reality produces a dramatic reinterpretation of what has been felt and lived by the person—moments of crisis and pain. What will be edited is determined by what has been remembered, collected, and written down: notes to the self, the ‘Rashomon’ effect turned inside out. From the several layers and versions of the biographical field text, the writer aims to tell a story with some degree of dramatic power. Editing, or crafting the text, will involve many decisions [...] (Denzin: 1997, 116-17)

The mystory text begins with those moments that define the crisis in question—a turning point in the person’s life. Ulmer (1989, pp. xii, 139) suggests the following starting point:

Write a mystory bringing into relation your experience with three levels of discourse—personal (autobiography), popular (community stories, oral history or popular culture), [and] expert (disciplines of knowledge). In each case use the punctum or sting of memory to locate items significant to you. (p. 209) (As quoted in Denzin: 1997, 117)

Ethnographic poetics instead is particularly suited to offer a representation of epiphanic moments in lived experience. As Richardson states:

If a goal of ethnography is to retell ‘lived experience’, to make another world accessible to the reader, then, I submit, the lyric

poem, and particularly a sequence of lyric poems with an implied narrative, come closer to achieving that goal than do other forms of ethnographic writing. (As quoted in Denzin: 1997, 209)

Now, this enterprise is doubly difficult in the case of anthropology of literature because what I am attempting is a rendering of my experience as a reader of literature to a scholarly and academic audience, who in turn will interpret what I write as autoethnography of reading. Thus the situational frame of the experience of reading and interpreting literature within an academic context makes me aware of the fact that academic discourse is also a ritualising and ritualised frame of interpretation. Ronald L. Grimes in his *Reading, Writing, and Ritualizing* (1993), writes of the various occasions when '[a] story becomes 'templated,' and thus ritualized [...]' (141). He identifies fourteen cases when readers use the story as a template:<sup>153</sup>

- (a) Imagining the author to be an oracle or diviner whom they consult;
- (b) Meditating on a book's revelation, awaiting its healing, or expecting to be inspired;
- (c) Envisioning one story as uniting with other stories until a kind of monomyth, scripture, or encyclopedic cluster forms among the totality of readings, and then considering this the single most comprehensive story (the story of stories);
- (d) searching for archetypes, that is modulated, recurring images;
- (e) identifying generative metaphors and imagining the whole as having been born of these elemental metaphoric predications;
- (f) identifying with the characters and aspiring to act like them;
- (g) amplifying the story by dreaming about it or imagining it in other ways;
- (h) re-reading it; *treating it as classical, canonical or required reading ; using it as an ethical norm or literary paradigm*; [my emphasis: what happens in an academic context]
- (i) defending it; endeavoring to control what kinds of critical attention are paid to it;
- (j) associating with others who regard it as the reader does;
- (k) treating the book itself with extra care, for example, by keeping it in a special place or having it bound in expensive materials;
- (l) avoiding actions that do not accord with values or episodes of the story;
- (m) allowing the story to judge, convict, or weigh readers in the balance; treating a narrative as a trial or test;
- (n) re-enacting the story of taking it as a charter for action. (141)

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<sup>153</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, *Reading, Writing and Ritualizing: Ritual in Fictive, Liturgical and Public Places* (Washington DC: Pastoral Press, 1993).

Despite literary critics' appalled reactions 'at such anticipated entanglement with texts' (141), Grimes agrees with 'Wayne Booth, who argues that stories are no better or worse than other reasons for acting' (141).

I agree, and also add that sometimes stories provide that extra insight in a situation of the heart and a creative solution for action too. I myself have been practising a few of the above actions (d, e, g, h, n) in my readings of these hybrid novels, which actually call for this different type of treatment and engagement on the part of the reader.

## 6.5 Autoethnography of Reading

Autoethnography of reading means self-observation, paying attention to my various (intellectual, emotional, bodily) responses, while reading or re-reading a particular text. On a related plane, it is about employing memory as a starting point: memory of personal life events or circumstances which tie in with the reading. Thus: reading fictional texts plus memory plus responses plus literary and anthropological discourses of knowledge equals autoethnography of reading, which is an anthropological practice in itself. Here are the most important excerpts from my journal of dialogic readings: as I read the novels I wrote down my own responses and did not prevent them from taking their own unexpected directions. According to Denzin (1997) autoethnography is a 'messy text', that is, one which is involved in the phenomenon it tries to convey, without 'purifying' it. For me, autoethnography is much more than a messy text: as I have already stated, it is a process and an encounter. The text as an end result has value in so far as it bears witness to the encounter between the reader's self-perceived fiction(s) of identity and the text.

In a work about anthropology of literature, it is necessary to situate myself as a 'reader', and practise autoethnography, beyond the abstraction that too often characterises academic discourse and makes existential experience irrelevant to our literary encounters. Because of the fact that I defend a phenomenological approach which shows the storied nature of all our interpretations and assumptions, I have constructed a narrative out of some facts of family history. This is inevitable; it is part and parcel of human meaning-making. If the intention is to relate personal experience and literary reading

experience and show to what extent they are interconnected both intellectually and emotionally, it is vital to produce some autobiography.

## 6.6 Here Comes 'The Reader'...

I am 'the reader' whose consciousness filters and conveys the main characteristics of the three texts chosen. My experience of these novels is inextricable from the awareness of the fiction of my own identity, as an individual and a social being. For as long as I can remember, I have always loved reading. My first memory of reading goes back to when I was around two years old and my father showed me his favourite comics. Although I learned to read when I was five, I could read images much earlier: I was lying on the floor of my bedroom, a shaft of light coming through the light yellow curtains on my forehead. I was engrossed in a date between Donald Duck and his fiancée, the smell of baking from the kitchen floating around my nostrils. I first learnt to read words together with my mother and a family friend. Ever since, reading has been the most enjoyable activity I engage in. As I grew up I became aware of how all the novels and stories I read have shaped me as a person. I could link important and specific moments of my life, with their attendant realizations, to different stories and novels. My parents, who had done well for themselves in society and had ascended into middle-class status, attached a huge importance to education, not only as a means of social advancement, but also as a cultivation of the whole person. Our family never lost track of its peasant origins and its partiality for the natural world. My father, in particular, nurtured this love in me, while my mother was somewhat more diffident and reliant on social propriety. My grandparents had been sharecroppers in a tiny village of central Italy, not far from Rome, the capital city, and yet so much distant from it in terms of material conditions and mentality. In the sixties many villagers started to move to Rome, following the economic boom and progress. My mother's father, however, opted for a mixed option: while staying in the countryside, he took on a job as truck driver for a renowned soft drink factory, whose 'aranciata' can even be found in Scottish cafes nowadays. He would commute to Rome every morning, waking up at four, and come back in the evening. He thus managed to buy his own land and never wanted to leave his village for the city. My father's father instead had been a seasonal immigrant to Germany, a

sharecropper and ambulant vendor of groceries. Both my grandmothers helped out in the fields, while also caring for four children each. My parents were the first in the family to have the chance to go to school and to take a ‘diploma di maturità’: after leaving a boarding school run by Catholic monks, my father went on to be an Air Force official, while my mother was to qualify as a primary teacher. I was born in Rome, but lived further North for many years. As a consequence of my father’s job, we moved across the country, from North to Central Italy. My feeling of being rootless gradually changed into a discovery of my family origins and its connection to the wider Italian socio-cultural and economic context. In this sense, the reading of Paul Ginsborg’s *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics: 1943–1980* (1990) was formative for my self-awareness and placing of myself into a sort of ‘lost’ or silenced tradition, whose ‘origins’ however struck me as constitutionally irretrievable.<sup>154</sup>

The conquest of reading was soon followed by that of writing, and ever since the two have been keeping company with one another. I have been a reader-writer almost all my life, both in an academic and a more personal sense. To me the opposition between the two has never been a real one, but always a matter of degree: a reading inspires a poem or a story of my own, and a poem or story I have written feeds into my next readings, as in a state of flow, through attitudes, emotions, memories and thoughts, which, however, are never entirely my own only.

## 6.7 Fragments of Spiralling Readings

### 6.7.1 Subjective Associations in the Reading of *Measuring the World*

*Measuring the World*. First chapter: ‘Die Reise’ (‘The Journey’): archetypal title. Gauss is introduced as a grumpy old man, only caring for his ‘ancient mother’’s judgment (2007: 4). The tone is comic; memories of my train journey to Berlin in 2001, as I now read about Gauss’ journey to Prussia in a coach. The journey is a literal journey, which contrasts with the archetypal undertone of the title. I associate the journey with Campbell’s quest, where the hero/Gauss is reluctant

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<sup>154</sup> Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1988* (London: Penguin, 1990).

and only pulls himself together when his ancient mother encourages him. Old age is the theme, then, ‘the pitiful arbitrariness of existence’ (4), the limitations of being born in a certain historical time. Irony plays a fundamental role here:

Jeder Dummkopf in zweihundert Jahren sich über ihn lustig machen und absurden Unsinn über seine Person erfinden könne. (9)

In another two hundred years each and every idiot would be able to make fun of him and invent the most complete nonsense about his character. (5)

This is an ironical *mise-en-abyme* of the author’s programme of drawing on the imaginary, unspoken dimension of history, fantasizing and giving narrative flesh to historical records. Other theme: the humiliation coming from bodily limitations. Scene where the gendarme asks for Gauss’ passport in the inn: I can visualize the gendarme in his uniform. This scene provides me with a full measure of Prussian atmosphere in September 1828 and its repressive environment. The interplay between the given historical situation and what some characters have foreknowledge of facilitates the unfolding of irony. As a reader, I find this irony effective because of the benefit of hindsight. I can also visualize the man with a beard defying the gendarme, as a typical romantic/subversive character. This scene evokes in me a sense of the underground rebellion running below the surface of Prussian society at that time.

‘Zufall, den Feind allen Wissens’ (13): ‘Chance’ as ‘the enemy of all knowledge’ (8): obsession with measuring and finding out the exact shape and dimension, the precise causes of everything. Although this is about Gauss as a character, it is about the enterprise of science and progress in general, as Gauss is an eminent scientist. However, he allows for exceptions to the laws of physics, such as ‘Gespenster oder die Uebertragung der Gedanken’ (13): ‘ghosts or thought transference’ (9). His son Eugen has foreknowledge of more down to earth phenomena: Berlin will be a metropolis in a few years. I sense a fantastic undercurrent, little cues scattered here and there: when Alexander von Humboldt is introduced, he looks like a fairy-tale character, ‘ein kleiner alter Herr mit schlohweissen Haaren’ (14): ‘a little old gentleman with snow-white hair’ (9).



The theme of time: the daguerreotype which is meant to 'der fliehenden Zeit entreissen' (15): 'snatch [the moment] out of the onrush of time' (10), but fails to do so; it only shows 'ein Gewirr gespenstischer Umrisse [...] die verschwommene Zeichnung von etwas, das aussah wie eine Landschaft unter Wasser' (17): 'a maze of ghostly outlines,' 'the blurred sketch of something like an underwater landscape' (12). I have a funny feeling of the frailties of human undertakings as the text goes on to display the different technical advancements of the time. The image of the underwater 'landscape' sticks in my mind as conspicuous, and it links up to Ariel's song in *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
 Of his bones are coral made;  
 Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
 Nothing of him that doth fade  
 But doth suffer a sea-change  
 Into something rich and strange.  
 (1.2. 396-401)

I have the impression that through the fantastic biography of Gauss and Humboldt runs a sort of subterranean oceanic force, which neither the one nor the other is in charge of. They merely scratch the surface. This first chapter I have been reading strikes me as profound in its characterization of human vanity and its futility. As a reader, the experience feels like looking at these characters and events from an alternative point of view, as if on the other side of a mirror.

Second chapter: 'Das Meer', ('The Sea'): another archetypal title. It is very imagistic and evokes a deep rough sea in my imagination. The sea, both as a geographical feature and a symbol of the unconscious runs throughout the chapter, although in the first half there is no sea, but a frozen pond where Humboldt, as a child, is almost drowning. His underwater experience is the turning point where he decides to be a biologist, in order to investigate the mysteries and riddles of life and measure everything which provokes fear in oneself:

Auf einmal war es still. Er sah nichts mehr, und die Kälte nahm ihm fast die Sinne. Erst da begriff er, dass er unter Wasser war. Er strampelte. Sein Kopf prallte gegen etwas Hartes, das Eis. Seine Fellmütze löste sich und schwebte davon, seine Haare richteten sich auf, seine Füße schlugen auf den Boden. Jetzt hatten sich seine Augen an die Dunkelheit gewöhnt. Einen Moment lang sah er eine erstarrte Landschaft: zitternde Halme, darüber Gewächse,

durchsichtig wie Schleier, einen einzelnen Fisch, eben noch da, jetzt schon weg, wie eine Täuschung. Er machte Schwimmbewegungen, stieg auf, prallte wieder gegen das Eis. Ihm wurde klar, dass er nur noch Sekunden zu leben hatte. Er tastete, und gerade als er keine Luft mehr hatte, sah er einen dunklen Fleck über sich die Oeffnung; er riss sich nach oben, atmete ein und aus und spuckte, das scharfkantige Eis zerschnitt ihm die Hände, er hievte sich empor, rollte sich ab, zog die Beine nach und robbte auf das Ufer zu. [...] Er streckte die Hand aus und half ihm auf die Füsse.

In der Nacht kam das Fieber. [...]

Ein Mann ging mit grossen Schritten im Zimmer auf und ab, wahrscheinlich der Arzt, und sagte, entscheide dich, gelingen oder nicht, das ist ein Entschluss, man muss dann nur durchhalten, oder? Aber als er darauf antworten wollte, erinnerte er sich nicht mehr, was gesagt worden war, statt dessen sah er ein weit ausgespanntes Meer unter einem elektrisch flackernden Himmel, und als er wieder die Augen öffnete, war es Mittag am übernächsten Tag, die Wintersonne hing bleich im Fenster, und sein Fieber hatte nachgelassen.

Von nun an wurden seine Noten besser. Er arbeitete konzentriert und nahm die Gewohnheit an, beim Nachdenken die Fäuste zu ballen, als müsse er einen Feind besiegen. [...]

Er wisse nun, sagte er zu Kunth, womit er sich befassen wolle. Mit dem Leben. (24-6)

Suddenly everything was silent. He couldn't see anything any more and the cold knocked him almost unconscious. Only now did he realize he was underwater. He kicked out. His head banged against something hard, the ice. His sheepskin hat came off and floated away, his hair was loose and his feet hit bottom. Now his eyes were accustoming themselves to the darkness. For a moment he saw a frozen landscape: trembling stalks, things growing above them, transparent as a veil, a lone fish, there for a moment then gone, like a hallucination. He made swimming motions, rose in the water, banged into the ice again. He realized he only had a few more seconds to live. He groped, and at the moment when he ran out of air, he saw a dark patch above him, the opening; he dragged himself up, gasped in air, breathed out again and spat, the sharp angles of the ice cut into his hands, he heaved himself out, rolled away, pulling his legs up after him, and lay there, panting and sobbing. [...]

That night the fever started. [...]

A man who must be the doctor was pacing up and down the room, and said it's up to you, you'll either make it or you won't, it's your decision, all you have to do is hold on, you know. But when he tried to answer, he could no longer remember what had been said; instead he was looking at the wide expanse of a sea under skies flickering with electricity, and when he opened his eyes again it was noon now days later, the winter sun was hanging all pale in the window and his fever had broken.

From now on his marks improved. He concentrated when he worked and began a habit of balling his fists while thinking, as if it there were an enemy to conquer. [...]

He knew now, he said to Kunth, what he wanted to concern himself with: Life. [...] He wanted to investigate Life, to understand its strange grip on the world. He wanted to uncover its tricks! (18-20)<sup>155</sup>

Later in the chapter the sea is there as a geographical element to be mapped and measured in an accurate way. My impression of an undercurrent, of an unstated force is reinforced.

The castle where Humboldt grew up was haunted, but the stories about the spirits were spookier than the spirits themselves:

Niemand konnte leugnen, dass es im Schloss spukte. Nichts Spektakuläres, bloss Schritte in leeren Gängen, Kinderweinen ohne Ursprung und manchmal ein schemenhafter Herr, der mit Schnarrenden Stimme darum bat, ihm Schuhbänder, kleine Spielzeugmagneten oder ein Glas Limonade abzukaufen. Unheimlicher als die Geister aber waren die Geschichten über sie: Kunth gab den beiden Jungen Bücher zu lesen, in denen es um Mönche ging, um offene Gräber, Hände, die aus der Tiefe ragten, in der Unterwelt gebrauten Elixiere und Séancen, bei denen Toten zu schreckensstarren Zuhörern sprachen. Solches kam gerade im Mode und war noch so neu, dass keine Gewohnheit gegen das Grauen half. Das sei nötig, erklärte Kunth, die Begegnung mit dem Dunkel sei Teil des Heranwachsens, wer metaphysische Angst nicht kenne, werde nie ein deutscher Mann. Einmal stiessen sie auf eine Geschichte über Aguirre den Wahnsinnigen, der seinem König abgeschworen und sich selbst zum Kaiser ernannt hatte. In einer Alptraumfahrt ohnegleichen waren er und seiner Männer den Orinoko entlanggefahren, an dessen Ufern das Unterholz so dicht war, dass man nicht an Land gehen konnte. Vögel schrien in den Sprachen ausgestorbener Völker, und wenn man aufblickte, spiegelte der Himmel Städte, deren Architektur offenbarte, dass ihre Erbauer keine Menschen waren. Noch immer waren kaum Forscher in diese Gegend vorgedrungen, und eine verlässliche Karte gab es nicht.

Aber er werde es tun, sagte der jüngere Bruder. Er werde dorthin reisen. (21-2)

Nobody could deny that the castle was haunted. Nothing spectacular, just footsteps in empty corridors, sounds of children crying out of nowhere, and sometimes a shadowy man who asked in a rasping voice to buy shoelaces, little toy magnets, or a glass of lemonade. But the stories about the spirits were even eerier than the spirits themselves. Kunth gave the two boys books to read full of monks and open graves and hands reaching up out of the depths and potions brewed in the underworld and séances where the dead talked to terrified listeners. This kind of thing was just becoming fashionable and was still so novel that there was no familiarity that could inure people to the feelings of

<sup>155</sup> All excerpts from the novel are taken from Carol Brown Janeway's published English translation (2007)

horror. And horror was necessary, according to Kunth, encountering the dark side of things was part of growing up; anyone innocent of metaphysical anxiety would never achieve German manhood. Once they stumbled on a story about Aguirre the Mad, who had renounced his king and declared himself emperor. He and his men traveled the length of the Orinoco in a journey that was the stuff of nightmares, past riverbanks so thick with undergrowth that it was impossible to land. Birds screamed in the language of extinct tribes, and when one looked up, the sky reflected cities whose architecture never came from human hands. Hardly any scholars had ever penetrated this region, and there was no reliable map.

But he would, said the younger brother. He would make the journey. (15-6)

I love the dark irony of this passage, the reference to ‘metaphysische Angst’: ‘metaphysical anxiety’ necessary to ‘achieve German manhood’ and the *Schauerroman* that was becoming fashionable in Germany. Behind this dark veil of irony though, there is seriousness about the contact with the unacknowledged shadows of existence. The power of story is evident from this passage. Indeed the story of Crazy Aguirre is to shape Humboldt’s intention to measure the length of the Orinoco river and to draw a reliable map. ‘Wann immer einen die Dinge erschreckten, sei es eine gute Idee, sie zu messen’ (22): ‘Whenever things were frightening, it was a good idea to measure them.’ (16)

I ‘see’ the last scene of Werner Herzog’s film about Aguirre,<sup>156</sup> interpreted by Klaus Kinski, adrift on a raft in the river, in the deep Amazonian forest.

Where am I? Sometimes I laugh, or smile while reading about Alexander von Humboldt’s education, determined by his family ‘majordomo’ Kunth, according to a fanciful interpretation of Goethe’s elaborate advice. Then, I am on the edge of an abyss: on the last cliff available, I sense my body muscles contract, as I feel the deep, although understated, questioning of high culture and the power of civilization. Because of this understatement, this questioning is all the more powerful in the narrative. What I have been reading is a trickster’s attempt at turning our known historical world upside down. The thought that in spite of reason, mystery is still at the core of our choice and will is spine-tingling, both scary and delightful at once.

Humboldt in his hallucinations sees ‘ein weit ausgespanntes Meer unter einem elektrisch flackernden Himmel’ (25): ‘the wide expanse of a sea under skies flickering with electricity’ (19). When he recovers, he has changed and

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<sup>156</sup> Werner Herzog, *Aguirre: der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre: The Wrath of God*), Germany, 1972.

become focused on what he wants to do in life: 'das Leben erforschen, die seltsame Hartnäckigkeit verstehen, mit der es den Globus umspanne. Er wollte ihm auf die Schliche kommen!' (26): 'To investigate life, to understand its strange grip on the world. He wanted to uncover its tricks!' (20) As if life were a conjuror?! The grip of the exotic and the fantastic continues to play a huge role in this chapter: see the explorer Georg Forster's tales of 'Drachen und lebenden Toten': 'dragons and the living dead', and of Captain Cook, who 'auf Hawaii gekocht und gegessen worden sei' (28): was 'boiled and eaten on Hawaii' (21).

While reading about the wrong theory of the Neptunists, who believed that 'das Erdinnere sei kalt und fest' (29): 'the core of the earth was cold, solid rock' (22), I get a sense of the intricacies and mixtures of error and truth that make up the search for knowledge and understanding. I am between the past described in the text and the present/future, but I am not in time just now. I am just poised in-between alternative worldviews and possibilities. I am aware of how new scientific models replace older ones, striving always to be more 'objective' or 'encompassing', but without ever managing to get past the conceptual imagery provided by what is already known. Only an imaginative leap can do the job.

I have to move on the chair, to adjust my position, and my head is taken by a sense of lightness, a slight vertigo. I cannot capture all my fleeting sensations, I am 'there', in 'the zone'; shivers all over my arms and legs.

Humboldt's way of dealing with what he fears, with what is scary, is to dissect and measure it, even inflicting pain on his own body and other creatures for accuracy's sake. He writes a letter to his brother which he then throws away: 'Unsere Brüderlichkeit, [...] wieso erscheint sie mir als das eigentliche Rätsel?' (33): 'Why, I wonder [...] does the fact that we are brothers strike me as the real riddle?' (26)

This letter which he tears 'in winzige Fetzen' (34): 'into little pieces' (26), is probably the narrator's judgment on Humboldt's achievements. It is ingenious that it should be imagined as Humboldt's own hidden afterthought about his own life and achievement. It is a statement about the sweeping flow of time, progress, change and chance, the whimsical passing and changing of circumstances and priorities.

When at sea and confronted with 'a sea monster', Humboldt says: 'Vielleicht die Dünste, [...] oder das schlechte Essen. Er beschloss, nichts darüber

aufzuschreiben' (45): 'Sea mists, perhaps [...] or bad food. He decided not to write anything down' (36).

The other way he deals with pain and what he feels is to ignore it. Only in his encounter with the dragon tree in the garden of Orotava, is Humboldt moved to tears before its majesty: 'so wehrte dieser Baum die Zeit ab: eine Klippe, an der ihr Fluss sich brach' (47): 'this tree warded off time: a crag against which its river broke' (38).

I am reminded of a big oak tree I used to love as a child. I would go and play in its shade. The oak was on the top of a hill above the sea. In that spot in my memory, time will never flow away. I am smiling softly now, empathizing with Humboldt's feeling and being at once under the oak branches as I am now, not as a child. This imaginative spot brings the different times of my life together and transcends them in the experience of *kairos*. My toes are tingling as I run from the oak tree downhill, breathless, against the wind. Humboldt is afraid somebody may have seen him while he embraced the trunk of the dragon tree. I am not. As I hear the narrator's voice in my inner ear, I step in and, smiling, tell Humboldt that it is ok to hug the dragon tree. Here my memories and the narrative clearly blend to form a 'replotting' (Gerrig's term) of the episode.

At the end of the chapter, Humboldt writes down what he sees around him and sends its description to his brother, adding: 'Ich weiss nicht, wann dies eintreffen wird, doch sieh zu, dass Du es in die Zeitung bekommst. Die Welt soll von mir erfahren. Ich müsste mich sehr irren, wenn ich ihr gleichgültig bin' (51): 'I don't know when this will arrive, but see to it that you get it into the newspaper. The world needs to learn of me. I doubt very much that I am of no interest to it' (41). The contrast between the narrator's voice and Humboldt's own attempts at conquering fame, and vanquishing existential angst through it engenders a powerful irony; it also has an effect of the humour lavished on Romantic culture.

Chapter on 'Die Höhle': 'The Cavern', where Humboldt and Bonpland descend into the cave of the dead:

Es ging steil bergab. Um sie knatterten Flügelschläge, doch nie streifte sie eines der Tiere. Sie tasteten sich an der Wand entlang zu einem Felsdom. Die Fackeln, zu schwach, um das Gewölbe auszuleuchten, warfen ihre Schatten übergross an die Wände.

Humboldt sah auf das Thermometer: Es werde immer wärmer, er bezweifle, dass Professor Werner daran Freude hätte! Dann sah er die Gestalt seiner Mutter neben sich. Er blinzelte, doch sie blieb länger sichtbar, als es sich für eine Sinnestäuschung, gehörte. Den Umhang unter dem Hals festgeknotet, den Kopf schief gelegt, geistesabwesend lächelnd, Kinn und Nase so dünn wie an ihrem letzten Tag, in den Händen einen verborgenen Regenschirm. Er schloss die Augen und zählte langsam bis zehn.

Wie bitte, fragte Bonpland.

Nichts, sagte Humboldt und hämmerte konzentriert einen Splitter aus dem Stein.

Dort hinten gehe es weiter, sagte Bonpland.

Es sei genug, sagte Humboldt.

Bonpland gab zu bedenken, dass er tiefer im Berg wohl noch unbekannte Pflanzen gebe.

Besser zurück, sagte Humboldt. Genug sei genug.

Sie folgten einem Bach in Richtung Tageslicht. Allmählich wurden die Vögel weniger, das Geschrei leiser, bald konnten sie die Fackeln löschen. (2005: 73-4)

The ground sloped sharply downhill. They were surrounded by the clattering of wings, yet no creature ever brushed against them. They groped their way along a wall to a rock cathedral. The torches, too feeble to illuminate the vault, threw exaggerated shadows on the walls. Humboldt looked at the thermometer: it was getting steadily warmer, he doubted Professor Werner would be pleased! The next thing he saw was the figure of his mother, standing next to him. He blinked, but she remained visible for longer than was appropriate for an illusion. Her shawl tied tight against her throat, head to one side, smiling absentmindedly, chin and nose as thin as they had been on the last day of her life, a bent umbrella in her hands. He closed his eyes and counted slowly to ten.

What did you say, asked Bonpland.

Nothing, said Humboldt, and concentrated on hammering a splinter out of the stone.

Further back there, the passage continued, said Bonpland.

They'd done enough, said Humboldt.

Bonpland offered up that there must surely be more unknown plants deeper inside the mountain.

Better to turn back, said Humboldt. Enough was enough.

They followed a stream in the direction of the sunlight.

Gradually the number of birds diminished, their screaming quieted, and soon they could extinguish the torches. (2007: 60-1)

Matter of fact tone: i.e. magical realism. Humboldt's dead mother is not 'an illusion', but a presence Humboldt denies. Then, as always when confronted with the inexplicable, he turns back: enough is enough.

This episode and the following one about the naked woman waiting for Humboldt in his monastery cell arouse in me some sadness and amusement at the same time. Behind this amusing account of one man's limits and

peculiarities, what is happening from my point of view? As a reader, I am entertained, and yet, as I 'see' the various episodes in my mind, I feel pity, disbelief and even ask myself what it is that works so well in this piece of fiction. Why do I feel so drawn to it? David Miall (2007) in his empirical study of literature states that the character's and the reader's interests overlap. He distinguishes between 'evaluative feelings', 'narrative feelings' and 'aesthetic feelings': enjoyment is an example of the first type, suspense of the second type, and fascination is an example of the third kind (2007: 44). Focusing on the neglect of the 'processes of feeling' (2007: 39) in the readers, he suggests:

[...] feeling facilitates border-crossing, that is feelings enable us to relate concepts in unrelated fields. Second, feeling prompts us to take a certain stance towards events, preparing us to interpret incoming evidence in a specific way; anticipation of this kind seems to be one of the fundamental properties of feeling. Third, a more common claim, feeling is generally self-implicating; it occurs when some issue of our self-concept is in question. (2007: 45)

Finally, feeling is self-referential. The most obvious self referential effect is the frequent experience of readers that they empathize with the experience and motives of the main character or characters in a narrative; that is, the reader comes to share a character's feelings and goals. But feeling has a wider scope in narratives than this: any feeling response involves self-concept issues. [...] Thus, feeling during reading not only causes schemata [habitual expectations, perceptual gestals, and responses] to be reconfigured, but also constitutes the route of access to motives for reading derived from the reader's self concept. (2007: 54-5)

Although I feel empathy, I cannot identify with Humboldt. The irony in the reported episode is foregrounded, and it is a fundamental characteristic of the text. It is about distancing my self from the protagonist, while fuelling my interest for the subtext of the cavern episode. It seems significant to me that the episodes of the cavern of the dead and Humboldt's unsuccessful sexual encounter should be set side by side. The chapter clearly foregrounds the former episode, while all others are like minor constellations hovering around it. However, this episode tickles my taste for the exotic and the mysterious, while defusing the tension of adventure, horror, or mystery narratives through its humour. In fact I feel no tension or sense of suspense whatsoever, just a sense of hopping around the world with a man who knows a lot about everything measurable and very little about himself. I have been smiling repeatedly: a smile



which fosters distance and reflection, and a strange sense of being in for an adventure, while being safe. Humboldt's merits as a geographer and explorer seem to me trivial when compared to the unexplored continent of the self. Maybe this is one of the points of the chapter and of the whole novel. The fact is that Humboldt is both one of the protagonists and a 'flat character' in the sense described by E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927).<sup>157</sup> This combination is remarkable: usually the protagonist evolves in some ways, but Humboldt is practically insulated from deep exploration both outside and inside himself.

As I turn the pages and pause to write down these notes, I am aware of cinematic scenes from films such as *The Mission*, set in the Amazonian forest, where Jeremy Irons and Robert De Niro play the two missionary priests who, facing the destruction brought about by the colonial government, choose different paths to help the natives. Jeremy Irons stays true to his religious vocation and ends up killed while celebrating Mass for the people, whereas Robert De Niro takes up arms to help the natives defend their land.<sup>158</sup>

This cinematic window gives me pleasure, deepens my appreciation of the novel, while the novel itself links up in my consciousness to centuries of history in pursuit of knowledge and technological progress. Humboldt himself is an emblem of this drive, which denies the actuality of death only to support an unnatural vivisection of all phenomena and objects. The mechanical drive, the impulse to *possess and manipulate* something in knowledge is the real death drive. Also, I am reminded of Plato's fable of the men in the cave, mistaking their own shadows for the real, the 'truth'.

The pages are slightly rough, as I turn them. Contraction, and then, expansion of my heart: I am still, I am moved. There is no drama, no pathos. This is something that appeals to me: the sense of truthfulness leaking through a rather 'crazy' narrative: another memory, this time of a sad girl's face in Glastonbury. She was Spanish, making coffee in a stall facing the ruins of the Abbey. She said she was happy there but she did not look so to me. It is the same feeling I get, when I stop smiling, while reading this episode and the chapter as a whole. I find that I wander from emotion to emotion while reading the various episodes, to end up feeling this quiet sense of sadness, physically felt between my chest and my solar plexus. I can see why some critics have said

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<sup>157</sup> Edward M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Hodder and Stoughton in association with Edward Arnold, [1927], 1993).

<sup>158</sup> Roland Joffé, *The Mission*, United Kingdom, 1986.

Kehlmann's writing has something in common with Brecht, in spite of the difference of their tones.

I am propelled into the narrative, while the narrative itself shapes itself through me, in me. As it builds itself into several images, scenes, episodes, several layers of memories, hopes, sensations and ideas mingle and colour the story itself. When I first read the book in German a few years ago, and came to this chapter, I was perplexed. This time is mostly pleasure tinged with pale sadness. And yet, there also is a sense of anticipation, something about things to come, which are, however, vague and ungraspable. I am projected in a no-place, yet simultaneously 'diffused', my sense of self blurred in a sense of possibility and potential, of alternatives. This is freedom and expansion. Yet, physically I am contained in a circumscribed space and located in a specific point in time, but this paradoxically enhances my sense of being the author of my life, my choices, of what I make of myself, as I read and let the reading seep through 'me'. While reading, the mind stretches the body and the body grounds the mind; their bridge is feeling, which expresses itself through layers upon layers of a multidimensional reality. It is a sensation of expansion, of metamorphic flow.

'Der Fluss': 'The River': this is a pivotal chapter. Here Humboldt is confronted with himself, but fails to acknowledge his own identity and limits. In the soothsayer's words he is 'nobody':

Mit einer schnellen Bewegung ergriff der Wahrsager Humboldts Hand. Der Wollte sie wegziehen, aber der Wahrsager war stärker; Humboldt, zum Mitspielen gezwungen, lächelte säuerlich. Der Wahrsager runzelte die Stirn und zog die Hand näher zu sich heran. Er beugte sich vor und wieder zurück. Kniff die Augen zusammen. Blies die Backen auf.

Er solle es schon sagen, rief Humboldt. Er habe noch anderes zu tun. Wenn da Schlimmes stehe, sei es ihm auch egal, er glaube ohnehin kein Wort.

Da stehe nichts Schlimmes.

Sondern?

Nichts. Der Wahrsager liess Humboldts Hand los. Es tue ihm leid, er wolle auch kein Geld. Er habe versagt.

Das begreife er nicht, sagte Humboldt.

Er auch nicht. Da sei nichts. Keine Vergangenheit, keine Gegenwart oder Zukunft. Da sei gewissermassen keiner zu sehen. Der Wahrsager blickte aufmerksam in Humboldts Gesicht. Niemand! (2005: 124-25)

In one swift movement, the soothsayer grabbed Humboldt's hand. He tried to pull away but the soothsayer was stronger; Humboldt, forced

to play along, gave a sour smile. The soothsayer frowned and pulled the hand closer. He bent forward, then straightened up again. Squeezed his eyes together. Puffed out his cheeks.

Just say it, cried Humboldt. He had other things to do. If something bad was there, it didn't matter, he didn't believe a word of it anyway.

Nothing bad there.

But?

Nothing. The soothsayer let go of Humboldt's hand. He was sorry, he didn't want any money, he couldn't do it.

He didn't understand, said Humboldt.

Him neither. It was nothing. No past, no present, no future. There was, so to speak, nothing and nobody to see. The soothsayer looked sharply into Humboldt's face. Nobody! (2007: 104-5)

The other striking element is the pervasiveness of storytelling, as a 'world-making' activity. Humboldt's life itself, in spite of his instinctive dislike of storytelling, is founded on a story, the story of Crazy Aguirre, who proclaimed himself emperor in the depth of the tropical jungle, adrift in the Orinoco, 'the river' of the chapter. The way Humboldt flattens Goethe's 'A Wanderer's Night Song' works a strange effect on me. His prosaic translation of Goethe's lines highlights the strangeness of the tropical habitat and the displacement of the poem itself in this unfamiliar setting, where the natural elements are so strong and unyielding.

Mosquitoes everywhere, as in the Latvian forests in July 2001. Those, and the forests in Bavaria, are my prototype for the pristine forest which once covered the whole of Europe.

Images crop up before my mind's eye, giving me a sense of the elemental, of retrieving something vaster than my personal self and history, yet some dimension where I can connect to the universe. I can feel the flow of the generations across centuries, and time is flexible and elastic while I am envisioning this huge river and the mystery of the Amazonian forest. Here the protagonist is the elemental Orinoco, against which all human weaknesses are measured in silent irony: Humboldt's are particularly childish and narrow-minded. Bonpland feels more human. And my own sense of adventure and awe gets stirred excitingly. I smile at Humboldt, at the four oarsmen and at the absurdity of the real in the uncanny dimensions of a world—that of the unwieldy wilderness—that cannot be reduced to human rules. Maybe that's why we need so much storytelling: only the imagination can bridge the gap for a while, giving

shape to ever new images and alternative viewpoints. Images are highly metaphorical hypotheses.

When the native soothsayer tries to read Humboldt's hand and finds 'no past, no present, no future', it is a revealing moment. Chaos and preoccupation with fame, futility and striving intertwine in my appraisal of this episode: chaos is the everlasting enemy of those who strive after fame, meaning and some form of glory. Shivers; in the past, I would have agreed with Humboldt's view. I live side by side with chaos now, and am more tolerant of the unknown.

It is amazing how I smile in amusement, while reading this chapter, and at the same time feel the spurs of mystery, of what is vast and unfathomable and get excited about it. Magic is everywhere.

Der Wind war heiss, als käme er aus einem Ofen.  
Der Uferbewuchs wurde dichter. Unter den Bäumen lagen weisse Schildkröteneier, Eidechsen klammerten sich wie hölzerne Verzierungen an den Bootsrumpf. Immer wieder strichen Spiegelungen von Vögeln übers Wasser, selbst wenn der Himmel leer war.  
Ein wundersames optisches Phänomen, sagte Humboldt.  
Das habe nichts mit Optik zu tun, sagte Mario. Vögel stürben unablässig, in jedem Moment, eigentlich täten sie wenig anderes. Ihre Geister lebten in den Spiegelungen fort. Irgendwo müssten sie ja hin, im Himmel wolle man sie nicht. (2005: 110)

The wind was as hot as if it were coming out of an oven. The growth on the banks was getting thicker. White turtles' eggs lay under the trees, lizards clung like wooden ornaments to the hull of the boat. Reflections of birds kept moving over the water, even when the sky was empty.

Remarkable optical phenomenon, said Humboldt.

Optical had nothing to do with it, said Mario. Birds were constantly dying at every moment, in fact they did little else. Their spirits lived on in their reflections. They had to go somewhere and they weren't wanted in heaven. (2007: 92)

This image reminds me of another I read about in an Italian contemporary novel by Licia Giaquinto, about the lost worldview of peasants and country folk.<sup>159</sup> I am poised between two worlds: culture, the memories of my German summers and my readings of Goethe's *Prometheus* and *Faust*, and most of all the beloved Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Rilke – and the sense of my belonging to the earth, to stirrings and emotions which can only partly be evoked and expressed through words. And then, I am like a tree, whose long branches stretch towards the sky,

<sup>159</sup> Licia Giaquinto, *La lanara* (Milano: Adelphi, 2010).

on the threshold between memory and aspiration, roots and wings. This is the very tension I bear as part of my history, which in turn is contained in a wider circle of awareness. At this moment, I am sharply aware of my journey so far, from life in provincial towns, to the gaining of a wider horizon. Even before the cities I moved to – Rome, Edinburgh, Munich, Glasgow – it was an inner cityscape that I built brick after brick not far from the sea, and the woods, of my childhood. I am cold and have a knot in my throat.

Reflections: it is remarkable in relation to the reading notes about the first chapter of *Measuring the World* that if I compare them with my first impressions of the text, their sense of being confronted with something uncanny remains unchanged. The apparently factual is subtly undermined by odd details which evoke in me, as a reader, a strange sense of displacement, of being a witness and an actor at the same time, and of being told more through the subtext of the descriptions and statements than through the factual details themselves. The magic is accomplished: I am drawn into the text, with a sense of anticipation, humour, but also of something ominous going on between the lines.

In the reading notes about ‘The River’, reflections on the narrative and on Humboldt’s role in it and my memories intertwine often, although the latter do not have a nostalgic character, but propel my thought process forward in a continuous dialogue with the text. Images which well up before my mind’s eye foster self-awareness, a sense of who I am in relation to the wider context of life and history around me.

By the end of *Measuring the World*, a few images and sensations stay with me: Aguirre, Humboldt measuring unknown phenomena, a vast expanse of water, huge trees, a sense of the power of chaos. These are the metaphorical core of clusters of images running through the whole narrative. I have reported my associations about a few chapters only, as it is impossible to do so for the whole novel. However, these images shape my whole reception of the novel through their power of suggestion.

### 6.7.2 On Reading *Lanark*: Thresholds of Feeling and Ethnographic Poetics I.

What seems quite an unrelated tale in the context of *Lanark*, the story of the Oracle in the 'Prologue'—which is placed after 'Book 3'—has a strong emotional impact on me. It feels like the bleakness it describes, the disembodied-ness and abstraction of the stock market. A whole way of thinking and the direction of the global civilization get exposed here in their nothingness, as this former stockbroker describes his (or her?) personal hell:

[...] Death is the only dependable exit, but death depends on the body and I had rejected the body. I was condemned to a future of replaying and replaying the tedious past and past and past and past. I was in hell. Without eyes I tried to weep, without lips to scream, and with all the force of my neglected heart I cried for help. [...] You know now why I am an oracle. By describing your life I will escape from the trap of my own. From my station in nonentity everything existent, everything not me, looks worthwhile and splendid: even things which most folk consider commonplace or dreadful. Your past is safe with me. I can promise to be accurate. (*Lanark*, 2007: 116)

That somebody who only likes numbers and abstractions should become a disembodied oracle is a wonderful metaphor. In his *Ensoulng Language*, Stephen Harrod Buhner distinguishes emotions, feelings and feeling.<sup>160</sup> The last one is a nonphysical sense of touch which is elicited by our presence in a certain place or environment rather than any other. Thus a restaurant or a house, can feel strange, or cosy, or welcoming. *Lanark* is such a place, a *topos* where I feel appalled most of the time, but there is an undercurrent of hope that keeps my hand turning the pages. Alasdair Gray describes the Oracle's tale as just a device to connect Lanark's and Thaw's lives. Yet, I *know* it is much more than that. How can I be so sure? The words have a texture and an unmistakable feeling to them, which reveals their intentions to an attentive reader. Abstraction, fear and rejection of the body are what the oracle stands for and hell is where these attitudes lead this sexless, disembodied being. It seems to me this also is a device to mock and expose the convention of the omniscient and objective narrator in realistic fiction as yet another abstraction.

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<sup>160</sup> Stephen Harrod Buhner, *Ensoulng Language: on the Art of Non-fiction and the Writer's Life* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2010).

To me the structure of *Lanark* is made of a series of ‘portals’ leading one to the other in non-linear succession. Hope is the driving force that propels Lanark and me as a reader forward, in spite of hell, and darkness. As I read, I am aware that with each passage from one ‘Book’ to another, my feelings shift, sometimes very subtly. Each ‘Book’ has a cover designed by Gray himself. And each cover brings together the main metaphorical elements contained in the novel. As I look at the first cover, that of ‘Book 3’, I have the distinct feeling of being in front of a threshold. I hesitate, as I study the images closely. All of the symbols depicted here have conventional meanings shared by Western cultures with classical roots. Yet, it is the combination of all these symbols which is suggestive and moves me.

By now, I know that *Lanark* is based on a double narrative, fantastic and realistic. The novel begins in a fantasy world but switches to a realistic one and then back again to the fantastic dimension. Moreover, the novel is divided in four ‘books’, with the first and the last fantastical books which contain the two realistic ones in the middle. Why did the author devise such a convoluted structure? Is it just ‘random’ creativity? If the double narrative structure has the specific function of provoking critical thinking about issues of fictionality and ontological status, the art plates and the artificial division into four ‘books’ not only reinforce this function but also facilitate the ritualization of the reader’s consciousness. This intangible process can only happen if the reader takes the book seriously as a material object or artefact. In other words, what medium does the writer use in order to play with the reader’s desire? Anthropologist Annette Weiner writes about material objects used in spells as the ‘carrier of magic’ (Weiner, 1983), highlighting the unity of function of both words and objects manipulated during spell chanting or making. In an analogous way *Lanark* as a book is ‘the carrier of magic’, because it is the book itself as a material object,<sup>161</sup> as an artefact with a unique graphic structure, which mediates the reader’s reading experience. In other words, *Lanark*’s art plates are integral to and not merely illustrative of the narrative content.

In my personal experience of reading *Lanark*, I was spellbound by the prints placed at the beginning of the book. I would come back to them, as often

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<sup>161</sup> Annette B. Weiner, ‘From Words, to Objects, to Magic: Hard Words and the Boundaries of Social Interaction’, in *Man*, New Series, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Dec., 1983), pp. 690-709.

as I got a new insight about their suggestive power. Here is what I wrote after moving back and forth between texts and images:

The book with its graphic plates placed at the beginning of each new section or 'Book' leads my attention along certain patterns or configurations of symbols, whose imaginary charge is exploited and exploded in order for the imaginal figurations to surface in all their polysemy. I experience a sort of cognitive dissonance, which is at the origin of the peculiar pleasure offered by the novel, having to switch from fantasy to realism to fantasy again, swinging between estrangement and amusement. I am going through different *limina*, (in)visible thresholds throughout the 'Books' of Lanark/Thaw's life. The fourfold division of the novel constantly reminds me of its fictionality but also of my own enmeshment in it, especially in the 'Epilogue'. For each crossed 'threshold' I am invited to pause and enter the pictures placed at the beginning of each 'Book' having to renegotiate my position and attitude as a reader. These pictures are visual hints to the atmosphere of what follows it, and their sarcasm warns me to ponder and enter with an 'appropriate' response. I see through the arbitrary and constructive work of the social and individual imaginary, through the specific fictive dimension embodied in this novel. Each art plate draws my attention into a specific direction and refers to diverse literary genres with parody.

The first plate, introducing 'Book Three', depicts the figure of a huge woman, History, *magistra vitae*, holding up the globe that contains fabulous creatures and names: melancholia for Northern Europe, Atlantis instead of America, and Africa, which according to classical reminiscences is already fabulous and exotic enough. The woman stands with her feet on *Mors* (death) and *Oblivio* (oblivion), implying that history is a fragile construction at its very base. On the globe the divine eye of *Providentia* shines, while on the left and on the right respectively, there stand the pillars of *bona fama* as *testis temporis* and *experientia*, and *fama mala* as *lux veritatis* and *vita memoriae*. A few pages into the novel, Lanark does not remember his past. The Social Security clerk in Unthank says that they do not know anything because Lanark comes from the sea, and they have no jurisdiction on it. The element of water is symbolic both of death and rebirth. Lanark is hanging symbolically between the two pillars of experience and the truth of memory, literally not knowing who he is.

The second plate, introducing 'Book One', features two pillars with the inscriptions 'Let Glasgow flourish by telling the truth', in between there is a ship



in the sea, a whale (reference to Jonah and the Leviathan), a river and a city, all depicting Glasgow and its past imperial glory. In the foreground there are faces of ordinary people and probably belonging to Lanark's memory as Thaw. In the background, on the top right corner, we are allowed a glimpse of the King from Hobbes's *Leviathan* (the State, the Sovereign and his imperial power). In this 'Book' the life of Thaw as a child in Glasgow is told.

The third plate introduces 'Book Two', Thaw's life as an adolescent and youth at Glasgow Art School, till he drowns in the sea, after killing Marjorie (Rima's alter ego). This plate depicts a dissecting room, where doctors surround a corpse during an anatomy lesson and Death stands above them all. At the top there is the emblem of the University of Glasgow itself, with its motto *Via Veritas Vita*. This is obviously a savagely sarcastic reference. At the bottom of the plate there is the inscription *Homo a se coctum esumque crustum est hoc fecit separation* [Man is a pie which bakes and eats itself and separation made it]. This is also Thaw's statement and his damning moment of epiphany.

Finally, the fourth and last plate introduces 'Book Four'. It shows us the Hobbesian King, and is also a reference to the meta-fictional author Nastler who figures in the 'Epilogue'. The King's body is made up of people. He holds the sword of force in one hand and the sceptre of persuasion in the other. At the top there is the first sentence of Hobbes' *Leviathan*: 'By Art is formed that great Mechanical Man called a State', which is sarcastically dubbed by Gray 'foremost of the Beasts of the Earth for Pride', a reference to Jonah, Melville's *Moby Dick* and the Leviathan itself, all at once. Below the King lies the empire with its cities and countries. On the left the theme of force is again represented by a stick and military caps, a picture of the British army and a scene of war. On the right Persuasion is represented by paper scrolls and the university mortar board and wig. This is confirmed by a university scene and a scene depicting a car assembly plant. In the centre at the bottom, Book four has the inscription 'The Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth', which is again a reference to Hobbes's text and points to Lanark's political entanglement.

The movement of my gaze and absorption of the text is spiral-like: I read on, I pause, I go back to the plates and each time they acquire more depth, so much so that eyes and pictures become part of the same 'system', as Gregory Bateson would have said. I am activating the magic of the book, mine is the energy feeding it. As the author tells Lanark: '[...] Your survival as a character

and mine as an author depend on us seducing a living soul in our printed world and trapping it here long enough for us to steal the imaginative energy which gives us life' (2007: 485).

'The Epilogue' and its reference to the 'printed world' amply demonstrate the importance of the materiality of *Lanark* as a book. By the end of the novel, I feel 'the weight of a large book in [my] hands, an object both inside and outside the economic system that makes it possible and negates its values at one and the same time'.<sup>162</sup> Anthropologist Annette Weiner (1983) suggests that in spell magic the material object associated with the words of the spell is as important as the words themselves, as it is 'the carrier of magic'. In the case of *Lanark*, the material, graphic structure of the book is the carrier of its verbal magic and as such its layout is as important as the words it conveys.

All these symbols give me a sense of being overloaded, saturated with outworn meanings. But in being crammed together into such a small space, the page, they clash and comment on each other in such a way that new meanings can arise. Traditionally, history has been defined as 'magistra vitae', yet here it is shown as crushing, leading to death and oblivion, while time is an arrow which points backwards. The 'magistra vitae' holds a globe where the continents are inhabited by the mythical creatures associated with them since classical times. This is a plunge into the imaginal, where saturated symbols mingle and get cast in a new light. I cannot explain away what I 'see': it is a peculiar experience, like being in front of a picture and taking in its shapes and colours, letting them 'sink' in. To me reading *Lanark* is feeling Scotland as a liminal place, bordering on an otherworld of unstated meanings and details. As if the fragile balance of my perception of what Scotland is and Scottish historical and cultural self-images could be tipped over to reveal a luminous dimension of collective and individual experience.

Before each 'threshold', each 'portal', each 'book cover', I pause, gaze and wait. It is reading by spiraling stations, a pathway which has been laid out through the author's artistic wisdom. What I call 'artistic wisdom' is neither rational nor random: it is a different kind of intelligence, one that feels its way through words and images as a bodily sensation of movement. The reader comes to grips with it in her/his own turn. As I 'move' through the novel, the two

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<sup>162</sup> Cairns Craig, 'Going Down to Hell is Easy: *Lanark*, Realism and the Limits of the Imagination, in Robert, Crawford and Thom, Nairn (eds.), *The Arts of Alasdair Gray* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 107.

parallel narratives amplify each other; literalization and metaphorization go hand in hand. Thus, Thaw's skin condition is Lanark's 'dragon-hide', a metaphorical name for an illness that becomes a literal and existential condition for Lanark. Thaw's daylight world is the reverse side of Lanark's underworld. It feels like being underwater and seeing distorted objects and properties, touching cold and hard surfaces, and warm and jelly bodies.

In chapter twenty-eight, 'Work', Thaw is a painter working on a mural for a church. He tells God about his sense of being stuck somewhere at the margins of an unwanted form of life:

But here I am, illustrating your discredited first chapter [Genesis] through an obsolete art form on a threatened building in a poor province of a collapsing empire (2007: 321)

God does not answer. He is silent throughout the novel. Instead, something in me speaks back:

I am also here, feeling the pain and wonder of coming into my own from heaps of waste and misunderstanding in the past. Who has not something to recriminate? And yet, as best as we can, we take charge and go in the direction we choose. Global wastelands mirror inner wastelands.

*Lanark*, a punch in the stomach

A pleasure delayed

A sour smile

A feeling of no respite

*Lanark*, a joke goes on and on

In everybody's mind

Like a machine or an engine

Drumming and droning into your sky.

Lanark is everyman

Caught between desire and childishness

How can this be changed?

How can we go on and take the lead

From what Lanark is not?

The meta-fictional 'epilogue'

Is a savage attack

On all those who think  
 They can impose on art.  
 Yet art is not free  
 In an iron-caged world  
 Where all that matters  
 Is what you score.  
 Numbers, measures, abstractions  
 Turn into gold in some tycoon's  
 Perfumed hands,  
 They turn into burns  
 Into a worker's hands  
 This is it then.  
 I sit here and feel with *Lanark*,  
 And think with *Lanark*  
 How to get out of hell  
 To breathe in the clean sunny air

Lanark hears or believes he hears his story as Thaw from the Oracle. Do we not, all of us, need some 'authoritative' version or account of our past? And yet, who can give it to us, if not what we love and trust?

Young Thaw says that 'Men are pies that bake and eat themselves, and the recipe is hate' (2007: 189). All the time, Lanark is looking for a way to find sun and love, to make up for that damning thought. As I read again this passage, a Shell oil tank is leaking and spilling its black oil in the Caribbean Sea, killing its flora and fauna. They are unable to stop the leakage. And nobody is paying for it. And even if they were, what difference would it make to the coral reefs and the fish of the sea?

Post-reading reflections: When reading *Lanark*, I felt that the thematic level of magic was being played out in my reading experience around the descent to hell, something that also had relevance for my circumstances at the time. This universal myth is re-envisioned in a thoroughly futuristic, dystopic and, most importantly, original way, as a container, a sort of Chinese box containing the smaller box of Duncan Thaw's life in Glasgow. At the same time, as I have already pointed out, 'hell' seems to take different and simultaneous forms. The theme of life as a dream is a major one in literature. Here it assumes

a rebel dimension against predestination and Monboddo's ideas of progress and civilization. As a reader, I am enthralled by the notion that what we see and experience as the 'normal' world is anything but normal, by the psychotic insight that there may be dimensions of dissociation and double meaning that pass us by and whose significance may only be realized through the power of fantasy. Fantasy as the real 'other side', a distorted version of the Celtic *sidhe*, a place which mirrors back our deepest fears and horrors, faults, grudges and misdeeds, but ultimately is a positive statement about life in its various aspects.

### 6.7.3 Ethnographic Poetics II and the Reading of *The Iguana*

The sense of an ending, of a nearing secular apocalypse brought about by our lacking sense of justice is what I associated with *The Iguana*, while I was reading it. This had to do with the rising of global terrorism all around, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor worldwide. I can only convey what it meant reading the novel through poetry, because it had to do mainly with an elusive feeling, an ungraspable sense of impending doom. The images found in the novel, the well, the death of God as a huge butterfly, become amplified metaphors, in turn amplifying events in current affairs and my own personal crisis. For a very long time, I could feel the proximity of the novel, and I could recognize it as a milestone in my life, a resisting rock against a raging sea. This has to do with its suggestive and metamorphic images, with the fact that the narrator addresses 'you', the 'thoughtful Reader' with no certainties or absolute directions, only offering highly oneiric situations:

Dove fosse realmente il conte, in questo frattempo, se al pozzo a guardare con gli altri se vi era traccia del Corpo di Dio, o in giro per l'isola, con la pistola nella povera mano, sulle orme dei colpevoli; se in fondo al pozzo o in quel freddo e allucinato tribunale, noi, Lettore, se pure ciò ti parrà strano, non possiamo dirti. Ma tu, se di questi continui passaggi da un luogo all'altro, e mutamenti di scena, e spezzati dialoghi, e rapido inserirsi di un luogo in un altro; se di questi intarsi di casa, di vento, di pozzo, di sentieri frementi e muti interni, di vive foglie e di morti muri, di raggi di sole e raggi di lampada, di cammino e di stasi, di immobilità e movimento, e soprattutto di un crescente dolore, di una tristezza senza requie, di una rabbia indicibile, mista a parole usuali, e anche della scomparsa della nostra Iguana, come di quei prodigi e quelle risa che hanno caratterizzato finora la nostra storia, sarai portato a chiedere spiegazione, rifletti, in attesa che possiamo dartene una (ammesso che vi sia una spiegazione

a questo mondo di imperscrutabili fenomeni, dove tu anche vivi), rifletti, pensieroso Lettore, alla particolare ristrettezza mentale del giovane architetto, dove però s'annida una generosità di cui egli non era, prima di sbarcare in questa dolorosa isola, al corrente. (2007: 160-61)

The Count's real location in this frangent of time, whether at the well along with the others, to see whether there was any vestige of the Body of God, or wandering about the island with the pistol in his hand on the trail of the culprits, or at the bottom of the well, or in that cold hallucinated court room, is something, Reader, though it may strike you as strange, that we are unable to tell you. If you're inclined to petition for an explanation of these continuous passages from one place to another, changes of scene, broken dialogs and rapidly telescoping locales, if you want to know the truth of these interplays of houses, winds, and wells, of trembling paths and mute interiors, of leaving leaves and dead walls, of sunrays and lamplights, of progress and stasis, of immobility and movement, and above all of a waxing pain, of a sadness knowing no repose, of unspeakable anger intermixed with commonplace words, and as well of the disappearance of both our Iguana and those prodigies and peals of laughter that have characterized our story up to now, in that case you ought to reflect—while awaiting whatever explanations we yet may prove able to furnish (presuming the very existence of explainability within this world of inscrutable phenomena where you too make your home)—you should reflect, thoughtful Reader, on the particularly narrow mind of our young Lombard architect and on how it nonetheless harbored a generosity of which he had never been aware previous to debarking on this tragic island. (1987: 170)

Such as the trial for the death of God:

‘Si introduca la Vittima’ disse il Giudice. E si alzò in piedi lui stesso, e tutta la sala si alzò piangendo e tremando.

Entrarono due uomini spingendo un carrello bianco, e sul carrello era deposto l'Altissimo.

Era, Lettore, se mai sei stato desideroso di conoscere le vere sembianze di colui del quale favoleggiamo da secoli, senza mai essere certi di averlo ravvisato, era, arrimpicata e addormita su una foglia, una semplice farfalla bianca. (2007: 164)

‘Bring in the Victim’, pronounced the Judge, rising to his feet. The whole hall of quivering, weeping people rose with him.

Two men entered, pushing a white trolley that bore the corpse of the Highest and Most Holy.

Surely you've longed to know the true semblance of this Being whom the centuries have surrounded with fables while leaving us always uncertain of having been faced with the undeniable. What lay there, curled up on a leaf and asleep, was a simple white butterfly. (1987: 174)

Or Aleardo's final recognition of the iguana at the bottom of the well and his attempt to save her:

Ed egli, di colpo, *la* rivide.

Non era una Iguana, e nemmeno una regina. Era una servetta come ce ne sono tante nelle isole, con due occhi fissi e grandi, in un volto non più grande di un chicco di riso. Ed aveva i capelli neri aggiustati come una torricella intorno al volto severo e timido. La sua bocca non sorrideva. Non era vestita di merletto bianco, ma di semplici cenci grigi. E su quei cenci, tutti sparsi intorno a lei come petali di fango, sembrava dormire, sognare. Gli occhi erano aperti e fissi. L'acqua saliva sempre.

'Perdita!' gridò il conte.

E sentì una voce, dal fondo, umile e strana, rispondere:

'Signore, sono qui'.

'Tieni fermo. Scendo'.

Da allora era cominciata la sua discesa, che finiva ora. (2007: 172)

He saw her again, quite suddenly.

She was no iguana, nor even a queen. She was a servant girl like so many to be found in the islands, with two large staring eyes in a face no larger than a grain of rice. She had black hair arranged like a little tower around a severe, timid face. An unsmiling mouth. Rather than white lace, she was dressed in simple grey rags. Lying on those rags, scattered all around her like petals of mud, she seemed to be sleeping, dreaming. Her eyes were open and fixed. The water kept rising.

'Perdita!' cried the Count.

He heard a strange, humble voice rise up from the bottom to answer him:

'I'm here, *o senhor conte*.'

'Hold on! I'm coming down.'

That was how his descent had begun, and now it was ending. (1987: 184)

And here are my personal epiphanies, expressed in the form of a poem, where historical and subjective times meet:

And as I walked along the beach whispering  
This time they won't get me, I was in for a big mistake  
As the wound of that September day had branches  
Casting shadows on the world, reflected in my vanity's lake.

Somebody else, whose name I can't remember,  
Came for me like rain and thunder seeping through my veins,  
Like quick poison turning green leaves into silvery  
Rocks and bones, I was left stranded with fragile remains.

I turned dying embers in my unbelieving hands,  
As the radio broadcast shattered trust and dreams

Across the globe, my book fell on the sand  
 Terror had just begun, red was the colour of people's screams.

The Iguana lay there, only half forgotten,  
 Windy fingers leafed through its whistling pages  
 I had nowhere to go but home  
 Again I would read about long-lost ages.

This time, I thought, the show is coming to a close  
 And I, as I had known myself, was another I had left  
 behind; again I searched among the ruins  
 like a seagull among the garbage, with no hope left.

It was then that Aleardo's madness became a sign,  
 But his coming to reason was too late:  
 We had been waiting too long, as if hiding  
 Hints and cues would make the world a place without hate.

A few months later, in May, God was dead.  
 His body was nowhere to be found.  
 His body was dead in my crumbling life,  
 My lying mirror fell to the ground.

God was a butterfly, huge and white,  
 I was a butterfly, tiny and white, but caged  
 In a tight cocoon of darkness, I could not see  
 the light, blundering around my old self, enraged.

Lost love and hope paraded on the highway  
 In the wilderness of my mind. Again  
 The news was full of terror and pain  
 I could hear the same old song's refrain.

War on terror was priority worldwide  
 No place to hide; only endless pursuit and flight.  
 For all the iguanas in this world of lies  
 A savior failed to come out in the light.

At the well Perdita was alive  
 Pulsing with the rhythm of a wounded heart  
 Falling short of the tests of life.  
 Somewhere, everywhere, joy was a lost art.

The intertwining of reading and other situations is an instance of 'anchoring', whereby 'life' and 'reading' interface, ground and interact with each other. The novel, by its openness and metamorphic outlook, worked on my sensations and emotions in a complex way. As D. Miall (2007), Keith Oatley (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2002, 2009), and others have shown, the cognitive approach to literary reading can be one-sided when feeling is not taken into



account.<sup>163</sup> Feeling is the starting point for the comprehension and retaining of reading as an experience, the only possible basis for further interpretation and intellectualization.

## 6.8 Reading as Ritual Vision Quest

While reading *The Iguana*, I became interested in the idea that as a reader I could be involved in a sort of vision quest, following the unique vicissitudes of the main protagonists of the respective narratives. Following Ricoeur, I state that a metaphor is a narrative in itself, at least a narrative *in nuce*. The idea that struck me is that the more or less formally deformed quest of the protagonists can be explicit or well concealed, for the reader to unravel and ponder on. I identified diverse layers of 'magic' in the narratives under examination which worked at different levels towards different effects.

Here is what anthropologist Robin Ridington says about the vision quest among a Native Canadian Nation, the Dunne-za, in his essay *Telling Secrets: Stories of the Vision Quest*:

Dunne-za stories of personal vision quest experiences and traditional Dunne-za myths are private and public versions of the same information. To a young person, the myths are public information while stories of the vision quest are personal secrets. During the course of a person's life, his or her identity becomes more myth-like until, as an old person, the events of the medicine story encountered as a child become public information. Story telling is a form of communication of great antiquity. In small scale band level societies stories are an important channel for interpreting and communicating personal experience. They are a bridge between subjectivity and the intersubjective realm of culture. The anthropologist's distinction between myth and narrative obscures the interpenetration of these two levels of symbolic communication in band level societies. In communicating a personal experience to others, the storyteller uses the same system of meaning found in traditional myths. At least among the Dunne-za, personal and cultural communications are systematically related to one another.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Keith Oatley, 'A taxonomy of the emotions of literary response and a theory of identification in fictional narrative', in *Poetics* 23 (1994), pp. 53-74; 'Meetings of minds: Dialogue, sympathy, and identification, in reading fiction', in *Poetics* 26 (1999), pp. 439-54.; 'Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact: Fiction as Cognitive and Emotional Simulation', in *Review of General Psychology* (1999), Vol. 3, No. 2, 101-17.; 'Emotions and the StoryWorlds of Fiction', in M. C. Green, J. J. Brock (eds.), *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2002).; Majia Djikic, Keith Oatley, Sara Zoeterman, and Jordan B. Peterson, 'On Being Moved by Art: How Reading Fiction Transforms the Self', in *Creativity Research Journal* (2009) 21: 1, pp. 24-9.

Another anthropologist, Michael Oren Fitzgerald, reports on this tradition in Crow tribal life:

One of the main rites of the Sun Dance religion is the vision quest. It is a period set for solitary prayer at a remote place. A person will usually spend three or four days of fasting on the vision quest, saying his prayers during all that time. He goes away up in the hills, gets away from people, and goes off by himself, and there fast and prays for either the three-or-four-day period he selected before he began his quest. There are many intentions that a person may have when he prepares to make a vision quest. He may want medicine, some kind of power to help him in battle or in all of his life.<sup>165</sup>

It is evident that to the vision quest there is a strong ritual element which is not only spiritually conceived but also linked to cultural norms. The vision quest has relevance for the individual, and at times for the whole community. What Ridington writes about the misleading distinction between narratives and myths is insightful: what makes the difference is the secrecy or public import of the message received during the quest. If storytelling is in its essence connective and visionary, story reading cannot but be a modern way of continuing to receive a sort of vision which makes the reader experience feeling and emotion, and later think about this experience. The book is public but also private in a way, so it joins the two dimensions of public myth and private narrative. I suggest that in our times it is at the juncture between the public-private domains that the reader's vision quest can take place. This is how I conceived of the reading of *The Iguana*. I saw how its themes and its quest spoke to me about events which were actually happening in the world around me, or evoked emotions which I found relevant for situations I was living in my own life at the time of reading. Furthermore, each re-reading brought new experiences, new visions, which had an impact on me. To use metaphors by Richard J. Gerrig (1993), I was being 'transported' by the book but at the same time I was not passive because I was 'performing' its narrative.<sup>166</sup>

In *The Iguana*, the action is prompted by the Count's search for new lands to buy, and partly because of the publisher his friend's search for sensationalist stories of oppression. As the novel unfolds however, the reader is constantly

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<sup>164</sup> Robin Ridington, 'Telling Secrets: Stories of the Vision Quest', *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* (1982), 2:213-219 (here p. 218-19).

<sup>165</sup> Michael O. Fitzgerald, *Yellowtail, Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief, An autobiography as told to Michael Oren Fitzgerald* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1991), p. 115.

<sup>166</sup> Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On The Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

baffled by strange fictive phenomena and rhetorical references and devices that need to be dwelt upon in some detail. I soon realized that there was a quest within a quest, or at least a rhetorical rendering of a quest, within the more prosaic motivation which offered the occasion for the whole narrative, namely the acquiring of lands and stories. The quest I am referring to works as a magical theme which structures the whole novel: Daddo as a knight, trying to rescue a damsel in distress, an iguana-girl, and finding instead his own fateful death, and in the process the meaning or relative meaninglessness of his own life.

The first time we hear of the theme of knighthood and chivalry is almost at the beginning:

E insomma il rispetto, quel sentimento sottile e un po' doloroso dell'altrui dignità, che un tempo suggeriva ai cavalieri, di fronte alla donna, tante imprese mirabili, e che il nobile Lombardo dedicava, senza saperlo, alla terra tutta [...] (2007: 21)

Knights once undertook redoubtable adventures on behalf of women who inspired this subtle, slightly painful feeling of the dignity of others, and now this noble Lombard felt it, unknowingly, for the whole face of the earth. (1987: 8)

More explicitly, at first seeing the Iguana, we are told:

Immediatamente il Daddo, con quello spirito di cavalleria che lo rendeva così amabile, senza perdere tempo a chiedersi, come avrebbe voluto la religione che egli professava, se quella creatura era cristiana o pagana (come più sembrava) [...] (2007: 30)

Chivalry was one of the qualities that made Daddo so likeable, and he didn't even stop to ask himself, as his religion would have told him to do, if this creature were Christian or pagan (the latter more likely). (1987: 17)

However, it is only half-way through the novel, in the thirteenth chapter, at the beginning of the second part of the narrative, that the young Don Ilario, apparently troubled by his own miserable condition, reads a passage from a poem by Captain Jorge Manrique to Daddo:

Nella sua città di Ocaña  
venne la morte a bussare  
alla porta,  
dicendo: 'Buon cavaliere  
lasciate il mondo fallace

e i suoi beni,  
 mostri l'indomita forza  
 il vostro cuore d'acciaro  
 nel trapasso.  
 E poiché vita e salute  
 in così poco conto aveste  
 per la fama,  
 faccia cuore la virtù  
 per subire quest'oltraggio  
 che vi chiama.  
 Non vi paglia troppo amara  
 la battaglia paurosa  
 che attendete,  
 che una vita assai più lunga  
 per la fama sì gloriosa  
 qua lasciate.  
 Se la vita dell'onore  
 neppur essa è eterna e vera,  
 sarà sempre  
 ciò malgrado, assai migliore  
 di quell'altra temporale  
 peritura... (2007: 114)

In his city of Ocaña,  
 Death came to knock  
 At the door,  
     saying, 'Good Cavalier,  
 take leave of this faulted world  
 and its goods;  
 let the steel of your heart  
 show its untamed strength  
 in the crossing;  
     and since you have held  
 both life and health of slight account  
 in favour of fame,  
 let virtue nerve your heart  
 to suffer the affront  
 that calls you.  
 'Think not of the frightful battle  
 you await  
 as overly bitter,  
 since a life all the longer  
 for glorious fame  
 is what you leave behind you.  
     Even the life of honour  
 is neither eternal nor true  
 though, all the same, far better  
 than that other, temporal  
 and quick to perish...' (1987: 114-15)

Now, this poem is a catalyst in the story. Daddo is enchanted by its words in a way that reveals to him the direction that he has to follow. Only ten pages later, we know that:

[Egli] si trovò a ripetere come in sogno quei versi del Commendatore Jorge Manrique [...] era ciò che il conte udiva distintamente, mescolato al suono più vivo del mare [...]. Mai il conte aveva udito parole più alte, come uno che abbia passato l'intera esistenza cercando di ricordarsi un motivetto angelico, che gli riporti il primo amore o chissà che. Ed ora l'aveva dentro. Così forte era la sua emozione, che non poté aggiungere sorriso a quella seria ed intensa espressione del volto [...]. (2007: 122)

the Count found himself dreamily repeating those lines by Captain Jorge Manrique [...it] was all the Count could hear distinctly, mixed with the more lively sound of the sea [...]. These were the noblest words the Count had ever heard. He was like a man who had traversed the entirety of a life always trying to remember some angelic tune that would carry him back to the first time he fell in love, or else to who knows what. Now he had it inside of him. His emotions were so strong that he couldn't add a smile to the intense and serious expression on his face [...]. (1987: 124-25)

After his attempt to rescue the iguana-girl in the well and the trial for the death of God, we are told that 'Cortesemente come'era vissuto, il conte morì' (2007: 173): 'Courteously, just as he had lived, the Count died' (1987: 185). The description of the dead Count re-instates the chivalric theme, as sealed in the unfathomableness of death:

Disteso in una specie di barca di quercia, che il suo marinaio e i fratelli selvaggi avevano con grande amore approntato, giaceva in un nero abito da società, mai messo prima d'allora, con una rosa di siepe tra le magre mani e sparsi i piedi eleganti di tanti altri gialli fiori. Il libro di Manrique e un crocifisso d'argento erano a un lato del guanciale. (2007: 174)

In a kind of oaken boat that his sailor and the two rude brothers had lovingly prepared, he lay in a suit of black evening dress he had never worn before, a briar rose within his slender hands, his elegant feet scattered over with an abundance of yellow flowers. Manrique's book and a silver cross were arranged at the side of his pillow. (1987: 186)

Quel sorriso, che turbò tutti, e li rese partecipi di non so che altezza di questo mondo, che pure si crede merce o altro, all'alba finì.

Il viaggiatore apparve più stanco e come segreto.  
Pioveva. (2007: 175)

Everyone present was deeply moved by that [the Count's] smile and it made them participants in who knows what summit of the glory of the world, no matter that the world is so commonly taken for merchandize, or something even less. The smile ended with the arrival of dawn. The voyager seemed more tired, and somehow secretive. It was raining. (1987: 187)

Count Aleardo thus is repeatedly evoked throughout the novel as a knight and a 'voyager'. But in the last chapter, he is more prosaically defined 'nessuno, e a ciò lo aveva portato la sua curiosa modestia (2007: 176): somebody who 'despite aura and possessions, had been a nobody, and he had been brought to that pass by his curious mediocrity' (1987: 188). Indeed Aleardo himself, during the trial for the death of God, recognizes as his only worthy deed having given his life to save the Iguana. Through his strange delirium he saw things at once as they were, as they had been, and as they should have been.

As a reader, I had been first absorbed by the vicissitudes of the Iguana herself, who to me was the protagonist, but as an oppressed maiden servant, shown in the scene of the well, she is revealed beyond any enchantment as an inarticulate being whose redemption is only partial. It was in my second reading of the novel, that I started to make sense of Aleardo's character as the centerpiece, the deforming mirror of whatever happened on the island. He is the unaware magician who filters what he sees and experiences through his 'carattere fantastico' (2007: 170): his 'fantasizing mind' (1987: 181). When I started to collect the cues about the condition of the Count as knight and voyager, the novel unfolded before my eyes as a remarkable metaphor: Daddo on his futile quest lands on a fallen island, a place he perceives as primordial but that in fact cannot escape the effects of the black magic of real estate transactions of which he himself is an agent. Thus the fall from grace of the Iguana is necessary to Aleardo, the Count, to pursue his own fate, and his own epiphany regarding his oppressive role in the socio-economic system. The iguana, who gives the title to the book, is nothing more than instrumental, a tool, and a wild inarticulate voice of nature.

As a reader the quest within the quest struck me as ironical and baffling. And yet, I too had my own epiphanic experience, my own vision quest as the text acted and constructed me as somebody different from how I was used to knowing and experiencing my own self. My emotions were shifting all the time according to the recognizable intentions of the narrator, who had taken pains to

depict the continuous transformations and metamorphoses of the iguana, the Guzman brothers and especially the young Don Ilario. In particular, the passage describing the rejuvenation of the latter, before meeting the Hopins family, is a piece of narrative magic, where the magical know-how of illusionism, costumes and refractions is fully depicted:

Lo specchio, rettangolare, era incorniciato d'oro vecchio, o bronzo, o qualcosa che luccicava, dov'erano scolpite delle foglie. [...] e, girato verso Aleardo, permetteva a questi di scorgere, come in un fatato ritratto, il volto del marchese, che nella realtà era celato. Ed era, convenne il conte, un volto di una grazia e luminosità meravigliose. Le rughe, e gli affanni che le avevano causate, completamente cancellate, sparite. Liscio come un cammeo, ma acceso di rosa sulle guance sfilate, quel volto raccontava soltanto la gioventù, la forza, la gloria dei diciott'anni. Svaniti anche i cenciosi abiti, il marchese portava sulla testa un cappello di velluto azzurro, ornato di una vera cascata di piume scarlatte, che gli venivano fin sul collo, mentre, sulle spalle, una corta cappa di raso nero, non nascondeva un radioso giubbone millecolori, disegnando le spalle erette, eleganti nel gran vigore. Il resto dell'abito era nero, e una bassa cintura d'argento, come una catena, lo serrava, mostrando, sull'anca, l'impugnatura di una raffinata arma anche d'argento. Come zaffiri appena incastonati nell'alabastro del volto, i suoi occhi brillavano, fin quasi alle lacrime, di fierezza, di gioia. Più nessuna traccia della sua tremenda vecchiezza. (2007: 69-70)

The mirror was rectangular and framed in old gold, or bronze, something that gleamed, and this frame was sculpted with leaves. [...] Turned towards Aleardo, it allowed him a vision, an enchanted portrait, of the Marquis' face, which otherwise was hidden and could otherwise not have been seen directly. The Count had to admit it was a face of marvelous grace and luminosity. The lines and the worries that had caused them had been entirely cancelled out. Had simply vanished. Smooth as a cameo, but with accents of pink on its finely smoothed cheeks, that face spoke solely of the youth, the strength, and the glory of living in an eighteen-year-old body. The raggedy clothing had likewise disappeared, and the Marquis wore a hat of blue velvet, adorned with a cascade of scarlet feathers down to the side of his neck; a short, black satin cape covered his back but offered no hiding to a gloriously pied blouse: a thousand radiant colors over finely outlined shoulders, erect, elegant, and full of vigour. The rest of his clothing was black, and a low silver belt, chainlike, hung across his flanks and held up the grip, silver again, of a refined and elegant weapon. Like sapphires loosely fit into the alabaster of his face, his eyes shone brightly enough to be full of tears, but in fact overflowed with pride and joy. There was no longer so much as a trace of the devastations of aging. (1987: 63)

Here the reader is a ‘side-participant’, to use Richard Gerrig’s term (1993: 128-32). In this case, I, as a reader, could see the whole scene of the enchanted reflection in the mirror, without being its primary recipient. This scene is one of the many examples in the narrative that stages remarkable and incomprehensible ‘transformations’. It is also a scene that alludes to one of the elements of magical know-how, the mirror with its game of reflections which can be more or less true to the object or deformed. The narrator offers no explanation for Ilario’s sudden transformation: it is just presented as self-evident and ‘enchanted’. Personally, I took it to be a reflection of the Marquis’ hope of a better destiny. But even this more plausible explanation is beside the point. The point here is that as a reader I am in the scene itself, maybe next to Daddo, or on a hidden balcony that helps me see the actions and reactions of both characters. In fact I not only see the described scene, but in the meanwhile, what is not said about Daddo, I do imagine: his astonishment, his bewildered look and disheveled hair, his pale countenance framed by doubt and tiredness. Through this remarkable scene, and the gaps left by the narrator I can occupy, as a reader, an evocative space, where the interwoven gazes of characters, narrator and reader circulate, creating a magical flow of imaginative power.

Linguistically and rhetorically, the use of poems, invocations and stage directions creates a peculiar effect for me as a reader, of being called to take part in a sort of psychodrama, imagining the whole scenario of the island, of which a map is provided at the beginning of the ninth chapter, where I may well walk around in a cloak of invisibility and yet see both what the characters see and much more too. Consider for example the following passage, following the statement that the Count’s mind was in delirium:

Egli udì ancora queste parole, in cui realtà e simbologia erano, purtroppo, come nei romanzi di avanguardia, disperatamente commiste, e lo agghiacciavano:

CUCINIERE. Ormai, il tempo non è più buono; già le onde *sparano*, e i Hopins hanno deciso di salpare immediatamente. Perciò, sbrigati. Si attendono da te le ultime disposizioni.

MENDES (Irritato). Non mi direte che non sapete cavarvela senza di me, no? Sto parlando con questo signore.

FELIPE. Chiamalo signore!

MENDES. C’era il Segovia, fino a pochi momenti fa in corridoio. Non l’avete incontrato? Non è a bordo?



COLE (meravigliato). Quale bordo, signore? Scostatevi dal pozzo. Potreste cadervi. (2007: 155)

He managed nonetheless to discern these words, in which reality and symbol were desperately, unfortunately intermingled, as in avant-garde novels. They made his blood run cold:

THE COOK: 'By now the weather has broken. The swells are cresting and breaking, and the Hopins have decided to sail immediately. So hurry up, everybody is waiting for your final instructions.'

MENDES: (irritated) 'You mean you are incapable of taking care of things without me? Can't you see I am talking with this gentleman?'

FELIPE: 'You call him a gentleman?'

MENDES: 'Segovia was here until just a few minutes ago, out in the corridor. Haven't you seen him? Isn't he already aboard?'

COLE (surprised): 'Aboard what, sir? Stand back away from that well! You could fall!' (1987: 141)

Here the characters are revealed to Aleardo and to the reader as masks of different aspects of 'reality', masks which are none the more insubstantial for that, but all the more terrifying in their being agents of a terrible and ineluctable hardness. Earlier on, the reader is informed that to Aleardo 'the terrible Mendes' discloses itself as 'il più *profondo* nome' (84): '*inner* name' (80) of the young Don Ilario. The doctrine of the inner name is in itself magical and mystical and points to inner qualities of being of a person or entity, of which the latter can be unaware. What is striking here is that the staged dialogue produces a strange, alienating effect, as well as facilitating the reader's vision quest. In my reading experience, it set me on a chain of images of situations of inauthentic contact between human beings, some of them remembered, some just evoked on the canvas of my imagination, and as a consequence led me to envision a web of connectedness through story: I evoked how differently the story could have unfolded and generally, how we, as human beings, can be connected through sharing narratives empathically.

The final 'invocation' is the materialization of the 'canto of the oppressed' looked for by the Milanese publisher Adelchi (named after Manzoni's tragedy published in 1822), but it is anything but sensationalist. If Manrique's poem had acted as a spell on Aleardo and on the reader likewise, now this invocation-prayer, composed of 'presentation', 'invitation' and 'salutation' is a humble song of good omen for the forgotten and oppressed of the world. It mentions again the well, and indeed the motif of the well is found in many folktales and fairy tales, where it is connected to the earth goddess. As we saw, in our novel, the well is the place of realization, of sacrifice, of dispelling of the

evil magic of oppression and hardness. Here is the whole 'canto', which very aptly ends the novel:

INVITO SCRITTO DAI FRATELLI GUZMAN PER AMORE DELLA IGUANA – ACCIOCCHÉ  
L'ANIMA IMMORTALE DEL CONTE – SIA SOLLECITATA A RAMMEMORARSI DI OCAÑA:

*Presentazione del luogo*

Questo è il mare  
Questo è il cielo  
Grigio e giallo  
Pioggia e gelo.

*Invito vero e proprio*

I

Aiutami.  
Riconoscimi.  
Salutami.  
Col mio nome chiamami,  
non con quello del serpe.  
Voglio risorgere.

II

Conte di Milano  
non aspettare,  
non voglio smeraldi  
voglio essere  
come te  
pietoso e giusto.

III

Signore caro,  
buono, pietoso!  
Grande conestabile,  
per amore del Re,  
di Carlo V,  
salva la Spagna,  
e il Portogallo,  
i Paesi vinti,  
che dormono  
nelle alghe  
nella pietra  
nella montagna  
nella Meseta  
e la Murcia,  
in Estremadura.  
Salva il toro,  
la mucca, l'agnello.  
Salva il pellegrino.  
Porta il lume,

porta il sole,  
acqua, giardini.

#### IV

Conte di Cristo  
non resistere.  
Vieni al pozzo,  
l'acqua non c'è.  
Non ci sono fiori,  
non c'è alcuno.  
C'è silenzio.  
Il serpe piange.  
La rana s'acquatta.  
C'è paura.  
Porta il lume.  
Porta il sole.  
Ci hanno giudicati  
Senza giudizio.  
Guarda nel pozzo.  
Se ci chiami  
Rispondiamo.

#### V

Non siamo morti.  
È novembre.  
Giallo e rosso  
dalla cisterna  
spunta il sole.  
Noi tremiamo.

#### VI

Salva il toro.  
Proteggi la mucca  
e l'agnello  
e la stella  
che cade.

#### *Saluto*

In Estremadura  
resterai  
conte caro  
sopra i monti  
ci guarderai,  
griderai. (2007: 181-84)

INVITATION WRITTEN BY THE GUZMAN BROTHERS FOR LOVE OF THE IGUANA - SO  
 THAT THE COUNT'S IMMORTAL SOUL - WILL BE ENCOURAGED TO REMEMBER  
 OCAÑA:

*Presentation of the place*

This is the sea!  
 This is the sky  
 Grey and yellow  
 Rain and cold

*True and proper invitation*

I

Help me.  
 Know me.  
 Greet me.  
 Call me by my name,  
 Not by the serpent's.  
 I want to come to life again.

II

Count of Milan  
 You are not to wait,  
 I don't want emeralds,  
 I want to be  
 Compassionate and just,  
 Like you.

III

Dear my lord,  
 Good and compassionate!  
 Grand Constable, for love of the King,  
 Of Charles the Fifth,  
 Save Spain  
 And Portugal,  
 The vanquished countries  
 Asleep  
 In the algae  
 In the stone  
 In the mountain  
 In Meseta  
 And Murcia,  
 In Estremadura.  
 Save the bull,  
 The cow, the lamb.  
 Save the pilgrim.  
 Bring the light,  
 Bring the sun,  
 Water and gardens.

IV

Count of Christ  
 You are not to resist.  
 Come to the well,  
 There is no water.  
 There are no flowers,  
 There is no one.  
 There is silence.  
 The serpent weeps.  
 The crouching frog.  
 There is fear.  
 Bring the light.  
 Bring the sun.  
 Without judgment  
 They have judged us.  
 Look into the well.  
 If you call us  
 We will answer.

V

We are not dead.  
 It is November.  
 Yellow and red,  
 The sun rises  
 From the cistern.  
 We tremble.

VI

Save the bull.  
 Protect the cow  
 And the lamb  
 And the falling  
 Star.

### *Salutation*

You will remain  
 Dear count  
 In Estremadura  
 You will look at us  
 From above the mountains,  
 Crying out. (1987: 195-97)

Again, the well is a place of confinement but, more importantly, of recognition: the humble of the earth are at its bottom, but long to be called by their names and to answer back to the call.

The last paragraph of the novel appeals directly to the reader:

E con ciò, Lettore cortese, ci congediamo [...] da Ocaña e dalla sua umile umanità. E se del mare che si è chiuso così facilmente su questi

mali e questi sorrisi, e sulla figura di un cupo gentiluomo, se del tempo che passa senza sosta, a Milano come nelle isole, tutto trascinando, diretto alla eternità, ti sorprenderai, ricorda, per favore, le pressanti domande di Unamuno, così alle tue simili, e vedrai che almeno tale sorpresa rimane uguale. (2007: 184)

And with that, dear Reader, we will take our leave [...] from Ocaña and its humble human family. And if you are surprised by the sea that closes so easily over these evils and these smiles, and over the figure of a dark-minded gentleman, or by time that endlessly passes, in Milan as in the islands, pulling everything into its wake and directed towards identity, then please remember Unamuno's pressing question and the similar questions you yourself have asked, and you will see at least this sense of surprise remains the same. (1987: 198)

The reference to 'Unamuno's pressing question' is enigmatic enough and could range from Unamuno's 'Christ, our Christ! Why have you forsaken us?' (*La Agonía del Cristianismo*, 1925), given the partial assimilation of Aleardo to Christ, to '...the longing for immortality, is it not perhaps the primal and fundamental condition of all reflective or human knowledge?' <sup>167</sup>

In my reading experience, the novel itself becomes a ship that leads me into a voyage, a journey through the hidden sea of my psyche. Indeed, the images and metaphors of departure, navigation, journeying, traversing one's life are prominent throughout the story. The island is that magical primordial, yet fallen place where even ancient blessings of nature turn into a curse. This island is everywhere inside our human hearts, as well as embodied in the innumerable islands of the world. Now I totally agree with Miall's statement about 'the *modifying* powers of feeling' that, 'at times, narrative feelings interact to produce metaphors of *personal* identification that modify self-understanding' (2007: 44, emphasis in the original).

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<sup>167</sup> Miguel, de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. by J. E. Crawford Fitch (New York: Dover, [1913], 1954).

## 7. History, Magic and Flux

In the previous chapter I focused on my experience as a reader, from a phenomenological point of view. However, because of obvious space constraints, I could only account for specific moments of my reading as I had lived through and in them. The subject matter of this chapter stems from the same experience: here *what I experienced as the main concerns* of the three novels is analyzed in detail and these concerns are shown in their narrative workings. More objectively, they may be defined as the ‘themes’ of the novels, but I would like to keep the phenomenological tone of my reading encounter, by focusing on what I perceived and received from the texts as actual and urgent concerns. *The Iguana*, *Lanark* and *Measuring the World* opened up a space where I could glimpse and experience history and modernity as narrative constructs in constant flux, through the concepts and techniques of magic. This statement needs some qualification: I am not stating that certain facts did or did not happen, but that the way they were emplotted and narrated through the ages makes all the difference and constitutes differing historical and collective memories, depending on who is telling the story and who is listening to it. The debate about narrative and history is a complex one and has by no means been exhausted. This is not the right place to impinge on the domain of historians.<sup>168</sup>

However, a few observations are necessary. History as a domain of knowledge and writing, or more properly ‘historiography’ is a domain of human knowledge regulated by its own methods, practices and rules as much as any other domain of academic research and knowledge. As such it is a ‘literary artefact’ and a narrative construction.<sup>169</sup> However, as psychologist Jerome Bruner has stated in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986) and *Acts of Meaning* (1990), and as historian David Carr has reiterated, we, as humans, already live in the storied world of our human experience, in the sense that we are cognitively

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<sup>168</sup> For a full account of the debate see Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>169</sup> Hayden White, ‘The Historical Text as a Literary Artefact’, in Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 221-36.

endowed with the ability to organise our world and our experience of it through narrative and we do it all the time.<sup>170</sup> In Munslow's apt words:

Human beings are story tellers who exist ontologically in a universe of narrative making. Narrativist thinkers like Jerome Bruner hold that narrative making is wired into the human brain as the key mechanism for representing reality (i.e., not added on after we have analysed, explained and produced meaning). For Bruner, narrative is the *a priori* concept through which we apprehend reality. This suggests narrative is *the* mode of cognition.<sup>171</sup>

Thus, we process the flux of reality and give it structure and shape through narrative. We never process raw data, but we mediate and shape their flux through our own cognitive narrative-making, which is in its own turn manifests in certain specific forms rather than others because of our specific social and cultural backgrounds. Munslow continues:

Moreover, in acknowledging this [the point made in the preceding quotation] we are forced to consider Hayden White's famous metahistorical argument concerning the functioning of the trope, which is the metaphorical (linguistic) turning of one thing into another in order to create meaning. As Bruner suggests, narrative is a form of cognition (knowing), one that is particularly applicable to story telling disciplines like history. (2007: 16)

And, of course, literature: in the previous chapter we have considered how metaphor is much more than a linguistic phenomenon, but, indeed, a conceptual one. Here, *The Iguana, Measuring the world* and *Lanark, qua* specific hybrid novels, are shown in their epistemological value, in their unsettling capacity to deconstruct precisely the notion of 'reality' and the category of the 'individual' as given, rather than as *ongoing* historical conquests of human beings. Ortese employs irony, critique of civilization and narrative magic to this end. The metamorphic magic of the novel and its depiction of the shifting boundaries of 'reality' articulate Ortese's reflection on the complex relation among what we can know, a sense of identity and history. In Ortese's hands magic is an epistemological tool, which points to the fluidity of 'presence' in the historical dimension. This very theme is at the core of anthropologist Ernesto De Martino's thought too.

<sup>170</sup> David Carr, 'Narrative and the Real World: an Argument for Continuity', in Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), pp. 143–56; and 'Getting the Story Straight: Narrative and Historical Knowledge.', in Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), pp. 197–208.

<sup>171</sup> Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 16.



Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino in his *Il Mondo Magico. Prolegomeni a una storia del magismo*, first published in 1948, was critical of much British and French anthropology because, in his view, it failed to historicize the cultural phenomena of the 'primitive people' it observed. He maintained that magic is the first human attempt to state our own being in the world, a struggle for our own existence in a precarious world that more often than not undermines human life. De Martino outlined the theme of the 'loss of presence' as a coming out of the historical dimension—a dimension that is specific to human individual and social existence—while magical practices give the individual the possibility to overcome the very risk of losing one's social and historical identity. Furthermore, it is only through the risks connected to magical practices that the individual and his community can overcome the risk of non-being and affirm their own existence in the historical world. Thus magic is the first step in the conquest of human self-awareness as a historical being and a system of guarantees for his being in the world. The individual and reality are seen as historical conquests by the human being, who through magic lays out a first stepping stone towards his spiritual self-liberation. De Martino's view is interesting because it goes beyond an evolutionary paradigm that had characterized British anthropology from its inception. In fact De Martino was profoundly critical of labelling of magic as superstition or regressive and ignorant practices, and showed how positivist science was repelled by the very *possibility* of the existence of the paranormal and supernatural, thus exposing a prejudice typical of our rationalist western societies.

It is precisely the complex phenomenon of modernity with its concomitant rationalism, scientism, capitalism and institutionalised religion that is at the centre of a deconstruction attempt in the three novels discussed here. Ortese, Gray and Kehlmann deconstruct precisely the notion of reality and the individual as givens, by employing the critique of civilization, satire and narrative magic. We will see how the novels are capable of dealing creatively with the issues of history and reification.

Reading the novels was a powerful experience for me because they all appropriate specific historical moments and attempt a de-reification of the category of 'history' itself through the use of magical means of narration. Not only that: the novels pushed me as a reader to enact an imaginary confrontation with the fluid process of reality, in all its ambiguous shape-shifting. In fact, it is

my contention that as hybrid novels, *Lanark*, *The Iguana* and *Measuring the World* stage a sort of metaphysics of art, envisioning themselves as artistic endeavours that deal with and perform the very flux of reality: hybrid art as dealing with process and change as the very core of the real, rather than with questions of substance and Being. Thus, as shown below, *Lanark* deals with the hybrid by employing alchemical concepts and the principles of the magical assemblage, *The Iguana* thrives on shape-shifting and metamorphosis, while *Measuring the World* shows how chaos rules supreme beyond illusions of scientific control and quantification, as Gauss himself, during his balloon voyage, realizes when he catches the first glimpses of non-Euclidean geometry. These techniques and concepts of magic make for a peculiar reading experience, whereby history and modernity are seen as narrative constructs in flux.

The foundations of the philosophy of modernity rely on a sharp distinction between the domain of intellectual and private belief on the one hand, and social institutions with sanctioned correct and accepted public practices, on the other. The public citizen and the private individual are not necessarily reconciled. This way of conceptualising human existence leaves completely unresolved the issue of the imagination as a matter of creative practice, rather than mere belief: in fact, imagination has been defined down the centuries in its relation to belief, whether as a make-believe or a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. However, our very conceptualisations, including those at the base of ‘modernity’ as the novels show in their different ways, arise from the creativity of the imagination, which according to Castoriadis is the very ‘magma’ whence every idea, practice and institution crystallize. As we shall see in the next section, Western imagination has shaped an unassailable ‘Constitution’ as the very foundation of ‘modernity’.

## 7.2 Have We Ever Been Modern?

In a seminal essay entitled *We have never been modern* ([1991] 1993), sociologist and anthropologist of science Bruno Latour sets out to describe the philosophical and scientific origins of modernity in Western Europe: he identifies Hobbes’ political theory in the *Leviathan* and Boyle’s work on the pneumatic pump, which won the approval of an emerging community of scientists, as the two founding moments of what he calls ‘the modern Constitution’. In fact the

division of competences between physical sciences and political science is predicated upon the separation of the non-human objects on one hand and the human subjects on the other. Yet, in order to exist, these two sets of practices need the mediation of a laboratory and a social contract, respectively. However, neither the laboratory nor the social contract can be assimilated entirely to the fields of non-human objects and of human subjects: they are both hybrids because in the laboratory the technical instruments and also animals are used by scientists sticking to agreed conventions, while in the social contract human subjects are being represented by non-human objects, creations such as the political institutions of the State. Nonetheless, to the 'modern' worldview the two realms of subjects and objects, natural sciences and social sciences, nature and society are neatly distinguished and separated. This means that 'modernity' is based on a double process of mediation and depuration: while we believe in the thorough separation of human subjects and non-human objects (depuration), the 'Constitution' of our modernity entails that a continuous process of mediation takes place between the two realms, in the form of hybrids whose existence we deny all too promptly.

The 'modern Constitution' is an ingenious construction, based on two strong paradoxes and four guarantees which make it almost impossible to overcome. The first paradox is that nature is considered as endlessly transcendent and not a human construction, while society is considered a human construction and immanent to human action. The second paradox is that exactly the reverse is considered to be true: nature is something human beings construct in a laboratory by consent and observation, while society is not a human construction but something that transcends the individual. These two ambiguous paradoxes, which lay at the heart of the 'modern Constitution', are what make the guarantees protecting the status of modernity so formidable.

The first guarantee is that even if we construct 'nature', it is as if we did not; the second guarantee is that even if we do not construct 'society', it is as if we did; thus the third guarantee is that 'nature' and 'society' must be completely distinct from one another, depuration and mediation must be neatly separated. The fourth and last guarantee is that God is elided and removed far away from both nature and society, but not completely abandoned: modern man can be an atheist without abandoning religion and spirituality in his heart. These four guarantees function as 'checks and balances' on each other, in the sense

that each pertaining domain of thought and action ‘polices’ the others. This is the strength and the essence of modernity: such an invincible concoction that, other cultures (or what Latour calls ‘nature-cultures’) have become pre-modern by contrast and have had no chance of escape or victory against the advance of ‘modernity’.

In fact when a modern person says that nature is transcendent, he is saying critically that nothing can be done against natural laws; when he says that nature is immanent, he is saying that we have endless possibilities; and if he says that society is immanent, then he means we are completely free, while when he says that society is transcendent, he is stating that nothing can be done against the laws of society. Thus the ‘modern Constitution’ allows and is based on the proliferation of hybrids, while even denying and removing their possibility. This happens because of the fact that the four guarantees, while being in opposition, *de facto* enable the coexistence of all contradictory conditions. But this powerful freedom of doing and undoing, affirming and denying, which characterizes the ‘modern Constitution’ is what has undermined the rigid separation of nature and society advocated by the Constitution itself. In this sense modernity has never existed and we have never been modern. Depuration on a conceptual level has made possible the proliferation of hybrids and ‘monsters’ at all levels; thus the contradictions of modernity, once they have emerged and been exposed, make for the defeat of modernity itself. When we start to think about the workings of depuration and mediation at the same time, we stop being modern, because modernity is based on this vast repression of the realm of the hybrid, while factually allowing its existence in a silent way.

Latour’s critique shows how the history of modernity as a succession of technical, scientific, economic, political revolutions which have broken all the ties with the *Ancien Régime* is a faulty representational device, while the very proliferation of the repressed hybrids makes for the collapse of modernity. In fact while in the history of modern Western philosophy the depuration process and separation of subject and object goes on to the end, from Kant down to phenomenology, Habermas and the post-moderns, the mediation process also continues and causes the proliferation of hybrid ‘almost-objects’, while the two poles of society and nature go further apart.

Postmodern philosophers, according to Latour, are the gravediggers of the modern project. In fact by criticizing science and thinking that scientists are

‘extraterrestrial’ (Latour, 1993: 61-2), they shoot at the heart of modernism. However, Latour says:

The post-moderns believe they are still modern because they accept the total division between the material and the technological world on the one hand and the linguistic play of speaking subjects on the other [...] But they are mistaken, because true moderns have always surreptitiously multiplied intermediaries in order to try to conceptualize the massive expansion of hybrids as well as their purification. The sciences have always been as intimately linked to communities as Boyle’s pump or Hobbes’ Leviathan. *It is the double contradiction that is modern, the contradiction between the two constitutional guarantees of Nature and Society on the one hand, and between the practice of purification and the practice of mediation on the other.* By believing in the total separation of the three terms, by really believing that scientists are extra-terrestrials, that matter is immaterial, that technology is ahuman, that politics is pure simulacrum the postmoderns in fact finish off modernism, by definitively taking away the mainspring that had been the source of its tension. (61-2)

What is interesting in Latour’s analysis is the implication that we have never abandoned the one and same a-modern ‘anthropological matrix’ and, for the purposes of this study, it provides the possibility to go beyond the ‘modern’-‘postmodern’ divide in the analysis of literary works where hybrids and monsters proliferate abundantly. In fact these novels explore the peculiar characters of our a-modern ‘nature-culture’, which through an abstract conceptual purism allows hybridization practices and metamorphic identities. Gray, Ortese and Kehlmann all show the emergence and development of the ‘modern’, in its various stages, and expose its contradictions in the construction and depiction of reality. First, we start with Gray’s novel *Lanark*.

### **7.3 *Lanark*, the ‘Origins of Modernity’ and the Diagnosis of its Condition**

*Lanark* was published for the first time in 1981 and was hailed as the contemporary Scottish classic, on a par with James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in Irish literature. As it will be shown, *Lanark*, as a novel which exposes the various processes and institutions of what we call ‘modernity’, mimics through its construction, meta-fictional strategies and inter-textual references the very

process whereby a society institutes itself in all its aspects, both material and symbolic.

I adopt the concept of an a-modern cultural matrix, and the use of post-mythological strategies and re-mythicization in its very context, in order to analyse the novel and its critique of 'modernity'. Moreover, in order to uphold the claim that the concept of magic, both in its religious and secular forms, can help advance literary discourse on fiction which blends conventions and genres, I employ a Jungian perspective on alchemy, as well as references to fetishism, religious magic and illusionism. Finally, I analyse the novel's structural logic and textual games.

#### **7.4 A Look At *Lanark*'s 'True' Sources in the 'Epilogue' and their Significance**

The above insight of an a-modern anthropological matrix in Western culture finds an uncanny creative correspondence in *Lanark*. While scanning the 'Index of Plagiarisms' in small print – contained in the 'Epilogue' – it is easy to be carried away by the comic verve of the device of mock-academic notes and plagiarized sources. Many of the 'plagiarisms' are in fact a pleasure to read for their irony and playfulness. They are classified in the following way:

There are three kinds of literary theft in this book:

BLOCK PLAGIARISM, where someone else's work is printed as a distinct typographical unit, IMBEDDED PLAGIARISM, where stolen words are concealed within the body of the narrative, and DIFFUSE PLAGIARISM, where scenery, characters, actions or novel ideas have been stolen without the original words describing them. To save space these will be referred to hereafter as Blockplag, Implag, and Difplag. (485)

Apart from the parodic intent, and well hidden among the rest, there are three fundamental 'plagiarisms', which are key to understanding *Lanark* as a whole and need to be quoted at length:

## HOBBS, THOMAS

Books 3 and 4 are Difflags of Hobbes' daemonic metaphor *Leviathan*, which starts with the words 'By art is created that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth or State (in Latin, *Civitas*) which is but an artificial man.' Describing a state or tribe as a single man is as old as society - Plutarch does it in his life of Coriolanus—but Hobbes deliberately makes the metaphor a monstrous one. His state is the sort of creature Frankenstein made: mechanical yet lively; lacking ideas, yet directed by cunning brains; morally and physically clumsy, but full of strength got from people forced to supply its belly, the market. In a famous title page this state is shown threatening a whole earth with the symbols of warfare and religion. Hobbes named it from the verse drama *Job*, in which God describes it as a huge water beast he is especially proud to have made because it is 'king of all the children of pride.' [...] (489 - 90)

## JUNG, CARL

Nearly every chapter of the book is a Difflag of the mythic 'Night Journey of the Hero' described in that charming but practically useless treatise *Psychology and Alchemy*. This is most obvious in the purification by swallowing at the end of chapter 6. [...] But the hero, Lanark, gains an un-Jungian political dimension by being swallowed by Hobbes' *Leviathan*. (See HOBBS.) (491)

## MONBODDO, LORD

Chap. 32, para. 3. The reference to James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, demonstrates the weakness of the fabulous and allegorical part of *Lanark*. The 'institute' seems to represent that official body of learning which began with the ancient priesthoods and Athenian academies, was monopolized by the Catholic Church and later dispersed among universities and research foundations. But if the 'council' represents government, then the most striking union of 'council' and 'institute' occurred in 1662 when Charles II chartered the Royal Society for the Advancement of the Arts and Sciences. James Burnett of Monboddo belonged to an Edinburgh Corresponding Society which advanced the cause of science quite unofficially until granted a royal charter in 1782. He was a court of session judge, a friend of King George and an erudite metaphysician with a faith in satyrs and mermaids, but has only been saved from oblivion by the animadversions against his theory of human descent from the ape in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. By plagiarizing and annexing his name to a dynasty of scientific Caesars the author can only be motivated by Scottish chauvinism or a penchant for resounding nomenclature. A more fitting embodiment of government, science, trade and religion would have been Robert Boyle, son of the Earl of Cork and father of modern chemistry. He was founder of the Royal Society, and his

strong religious principles also led him to procure a charter for the East India Company, which he expected to propagate Christianity in the Orient. (494)

As these references to Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle show, Gray's creative analysis of modernity is uncannily close to Latour's argument. Gray highlights the hybrid genesis of modernity, pointing to the strange mixture of secular endorsements and religious principles at work both in Hobbes' monstrous conception of the state as an 'artificial man' and in Boyle's scientific and religious endeavours. The reference to Lord Monboddoo, on the other hand, is more than 'Scottish chauvinism' or 'a penchant for resounding nomenclature': Iser (1993) reports the real Monboddoo's commonplace idea of the imagination as an intermediate faculty between the senses and reason, dating back to Aristotle, as current in the eighteenth century. In his *Origin and Progress of Language* (1773) Lord Monboddoo states:

The imagination has ... a creative power ... is conversant with the future as well as the past, and paints ... scenes that never did exist, and it is likely never will; for it may be said to create even the materials of those scenes ... formed upon the model of objects that have been presented by the sense, and are, as it were, imitations of them. (quoted in Iser: 176-77)

*Lanark* is also a novel about the destruction of the imagination effected by the mechanisms of a (hyper)-capitalist society. Monboddoo's speech in the last part of the novel conveys the rhetorical *topoi* of the apology of science and progress through centuries of Western cultural discourse.

This is the political dimension of *Lanark*. However, this is linked to an individual dimension, as the reference to Jung proves: Lanark's attempt at individuation and the obstacles he meets on the way are intertwined with the political ploys of the institute and the council; nonetheless, his journey through the night and adventures have a mythical dimension to them, inspired by that 'useless' treatise on *Psychology and Alchemy*. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the political and the mythical elements work together in the construction of the novel, implying that individuation is a feat that cannot be accomplished on one's own only. Being able to be oneself has to be tempered with concern for one own's fellow human beings. But why on earth did Gray select *Psychology and Alchemy* of all Jung's works?



The answer is manifold. First of all, it provides a narrative structure, the myth of the hero's night journey. However, this is only the most evident answer. Lanark is obsessed with finding a place where the sun shines. When Ozenfant tries to convince Lanark to become a doctor to cure other people from dragon-hide, Lanark answers in Sartrean fashion:

'You want to mix me with someone else's despair, and I hate despair! I want to be free and freedom is freedom from other people!'

Ozenfant smiled and nodded. He said 'A very dragonish sentiment! But you are no longer a dragon. It is time you learned a different sentiment.' (70)

Nonetheless Lanark still wants to love and have friends:

'I want the sun.'

Ozenfant began laughing heartily, then said, 'I beg your pardon, but to hear such a sober fellow declare such a strange passion was a little unexpected. Why the *sun*?'

Lanark was irritated beyond normal reticence. He said, 'I want to love, and meet friends, and work in it.'

'But you are no Athenian, no Florentine, you are a modern man! In modern civilizations those who work in the sunlight are a despised and dwindling minority. Even farmers are moving indoors. As for lovemaking and friendship, humanity has always preferred enjoying these at night. If you wanted the moon I could sympathize, but Apollo is quite discredited.' (78)

Lanark's quest for the sun is more than a weather related whim, it's about self-realization in a close knitted community, about finding meaning in one's life. As world mythology shows, the Self is in fact represented by the sun or sun-god. It is the human eternal quest for fulfilment. Ozenfant's answer about the moon is not only a possible reference to ambition ('wanting the moon') and to historical contemporary events such as the first men on the moon. It is something more and it is linked to alchemy, and in particular to the occult meaning of the interaction between sun and moon, as described in alchemical treatises such as the *Aurora Consurgens*, and explained in psychological terms by Jung in *Psychology and Alchemy*. Before looking at how *Lanark*'s subtext is alchemical and magical, it is necessary to note how the protagonist's mythical quest is reworked. Gray recasts a traditional quest myth, and the theme of the descent to hell or into the night, by assembling different elements together but leaving

the marks of the assembling on the 'limbs' of his work, in a Frankenstein-like fashion. In this way the double structure of the novel, both realistic and fantastic, is somehow disjunctive and split. Gray takes on the myth of the night journey as a frame and *leitmotiv* but also reworks Hobbes' mythical *Leviathan* state and shows it in its artificial and split character: 'The recipe is separation', as one of the characters says. Thus Gray shows how modernity is founded on a myth itself, the myth of progress and rationalization, by bringing together different myths and 'nursery tales'<sup>172</sup> and juggling them in the main mythical frame of the night journey or the descent to hell. In this sense he employs post-mythological strategies, in that he takes already explained and culturally contextualized myths and by a new way of assembling them he deprives them of their conventional meaning, in order to re-mythicize them according to a new vision.

In Jungian terms, Lanark and Thaw can be seen as Gray's answer to the Scottish tradition of the 'Caledonian anti-syzygy', an expression first used by G. Gregory Smith in his survey of Scottish literature in 1919: according to this scholar, Scottish fiction has a tradition of split characters such as Jekyll and Hyde and is characterized by a strong concern for the workings of a consciousness swinging between opposite personality types, like James Hogg's justified sinner. Lanark and Thaw, instead, are not so dissimilar from each other. One is the result of the other. Their problem is their incapacity to acknowledge their *anima*, and their incapacity for emotional contact and love. Where Thaw in his adolescence had been a 'devotee of the moon' with its esoteric cult of emotional self-sufficiency and detachment, Lanark wants the sun, a communal life in the day light. Yet they are both baffled in their efforts. At the end Lanark has a glimpse of hope: 'He was a slightly worried, ordinary old man but glad to see the light in the sky' (560). He is 'ordinary', so his individuation has not been accomplished fully, yet he sees some light. Sun and moon are alchemical symbols for the opposite poles of consciousness and the unconscious which need to be integrated. Lanark does experience a fleeting moment of personal apotheosis while climbing uphill with his son Alexander, which Cairns comments upon in the following way:

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<sup>172</sup> See the ironical reference to 'Victorian nursery tales' in the sixth note contained in the 'Epilogue', and also, more explicitly, Laura Hird's 'Ach Well, Alasdair Gray Interview', in *The New Review*: [www.laurahird.com/newreview/alasdairgray.html](http://www.laurahird.com/newreview/alasdairgray.html), [accessed 22 August 2010]. For more on *Lanark*, see also Mark Axelrod's 'A Conversation with Alasdair Gray', in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (Summer 1995).

In that one moment the apparently endless repetitions in which Thaw and Lanark are caught up become redemptive, because of the figure Lanark sees climbing the hill is both Thaw as a child and his own son: [...] Thaw and Lanark, son and father, reality and imagination, history and the history-less are momentarily fused together [...](in Crawford and Nairn 1991: 106)

## 7.5 The Alchemical Process and the Magic of the Body Politic

In spite of Gray's dismissive irony, Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* deserves a closer look in order to uncover deeper layers in the novel. In the same way, Hobbes' *Leviathan* is to be examined more closely. In fact these two works provided Gray with alchemical and magical concepts that, although not directly evident in the novel, are nonetheless the founding rock on which its overall vision of the interdependence of the religious/psychological and the secular/political rests. In fact these opposite domains have been elaborated as such during the modern period, starting with Hobbes and later the Enlightenment, and support each other's existence as strongly closed and separate types of concerns and practices, whose hybrid character has been carefully repressed and overshadowed. In *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung explains:

Slowly, in the course of the eighteenth century, alchemy perished in its own obscurity. Its method of explanation--'obscurum per obscurius, ignotum per ignotius' (the obscure by the more obscure, the unknown by the more unknown)--was incompatible with the spirit of the enlightenment and particularly with the dawning science of chemistry towards the end of the century. But these two new intellectual forces only gave the *coup de grace* to alchemy. Its inner decay had started at least a century earlier, at the same time of Jakob Boehme, when many alchemists deserted their alembics and melting-pots and devoted themselves entirely to (Hermetic) philosophy. It was then that the chemist and the Hermetic philosopher parted company. Chemistry became natural science, whereas Hermetic philosophy lost the empirical ground from under its feet and aspired to bombastic allegories and inane speculations which were kept alive only by memories of a better time. (*Collected Works* 12: 1953, 227)

Before that time in fact 'empirical science and mystical philosophy were more or less undifferentiated' (Jung, *Collected Works* 12: 1953, 228). This statement can help us make sense of Gray's use of an alchemical subtext in *Lanark* as an implicit reference to the plight of the commodified and fragmented imagination in a wild market economy. Abstraction, fragmentation, over-specialization and

alienation are all faces of this same condition. And of course, there also is an individual dimension to be considered.

Jung's study of alchemy was of fundamental importance for the development of his concept of individuation:

Through the study of . . . collective transformation processes and through understanding of alchemical symbolism I arrived at the central concept of my psychology: *the process of individuation*. (Jung, cited in Schwartz-Salant, 1995, p. 23)

The correspondence between alchemy and psychological integration is remarkable. The *nigredo*, or a certain darkness of the soul, which corresponds to melancholy or depression, in an optimal individuation process gives way to the *albedo*, or whiteneing and finally to redness, or *rubedo*, which is the sacred marriage of the opposites, of consciousness and the unconscious, symbolized by 'sun' and 'moon' respectively:

The illumination comes to a certain extent from the unconscious, since it is mainly dreams that put us on the track of enlightenment. This dawning light corresponds to the *albedo*, the moonlight which in the opinion of some alchemists heralds the rising sun. The growing redness (*rubedo*) which now follows denotes an increase of warmth and light coming from the sun, consciousness. This corresponds to the increasing participation of consciousness, which now begins to react emotionally to the contents produced by the unconscious. At first the process of integration is a 'fiery' conflict, but gradually it leads over to the 'melting' or synthesis of the opposites. The alchemists termed this the *rubedo*, in which the marriage of the red man and the white woman, Sol and Luna, is consummated.<sup>173</sup>

In *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung clarifies further the significance of the sun in attaining the last stage of the alchemical work:

The sun, by its many millions of revolutions, spins the gold into the earth. Little by little the sun has imprinted its image on the earth, and that image is the gold. The sun is the image of God, the heart is the sun's image in man, just as gold is the sun's image in the earth (also called *Deus terrenus*) and God is known in the gold. The golden image of God is the *anima aurea*, which, when breathed into common quicksilver, changes it into gold. (Jung, CW 12: 343-44)

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<sup>173</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Analytical Psychology: its Theory and Practice*, The Tavistock Lectures (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. 22-3.

Marie Louise von Franz in her lectures on *Alchemy* thus comments on the alchemical marriage of opposites described in an important Arabic text:

Now we will turn to the sun's love letter to the crescent moon, the waxing moon. The sun says: 'In great and ultimate weakness, I will give you from my beauty the light through which one reaches perfection'.

Purely astronomically, the sun has light while the moon only borrows from the sun, that is, the sun gives light to the moon, there is quite a natural basis of this. The sun in its radiant, emanating form, intends to impart some of its light to the moon so that the moon may reach perfection.

We have to realize what the sun and the moon meant to people at that time. The sun in general is an image of the Godhead; it is even later said in the text that the sun is the spiritual divinity, and this is in beauty emanating goodness, perhaps without shadow. It is beautiful and it imparts its light to the imperfect moon. Now the moon is feminine, it is a receptacle for the dead, it is responsible for all waxing and waning phenomena on earth: the growing of plants and their withering, the menstruation of women, the ebb and flow of tides, the becoming and dying again, and it therefore rules the corruptible world. [...]

Therefore the moon in all feminine humility and submission points out her absolutely equal right to existence: the sun needs the empty vessel into which its light can be poured, it needs darkness on which the light can shine, it needs matter in which the spirit can become visible. [...]

Here there is the conflict between the principle of consciousness and nature - the unconscious, the unknown. [...]

The sun and the moon say that if they are coupled in a balanced state then it is like a man and a woman who are completely there for each other. (von Franz, 1980: 149 - 53)

In *Lanark*, Thaw's fascination with the moon gives way to Lanark's obsession with the sun, without the perfect marriage of opposites being realized. Thus the protagonist swings between the two extremes without reaching psychological integration or achieving a satisfactory relationship with a woman (His hope is his son Alexander, and only at the end he has a glimpse of the sun). Moreover, Lanark gets swallowed by the political Leviathan, and this is his 'night journey'. Now the alchemical process is deformed and becomes monstrous. In the alchemical process,

Materials were mixed and worked within an alchemical vessel, variously known as a *vas*, retort, or *alembic*. Materials were combined

(*coniunctio*), separated (*separatio*), evaporated and distilled (*sublimatio*), and coagulated (*coagulatio*).<sup>174</sup>

But in *Lanark* the human being is swallowed and literally digested within the belly of the political Leviathan: separation is the only process taking place, human beings are used as fuel and energy supply for materialistic purposes. Matter sways over spirit. Thaw's damning moment is his negative epiphany about the state of society and the individual: 'Men are pies that bake and eat themselves, and the recipe is hate [...]' (*Lanark*, 2007: 188). This statement is taken up again in the frontispiece of Book 2, where it is linked up to the alchemical stage of *separatio*: *Homo a se coctum esumque crustum est hoc fecit separatio*. [Man is a pie which bakes and eats itself, and separation made it]

In the meta-fictional 'Epilogue', the encounter between Lanark and his author refers to Hobbes' *Leviathan* again: the author is in fact 'a King with a Bad Constitution' who 'encounters a critic' (*Lanark*, 2007: 480-81). Not only that: the reference to the metaphor of the monster's digesting society and the individual is even more explicit. Lanark asks his author:

'Are you pretending to be God?'

'Not nowadays. I used to be part of him, though. Yes, I am part of a part which was once the whole. But I went bad and was excreted. [...] Creation festers in me. I am excreting you and your world at the present moment. [...]'

'I am not religious,' said Lanark, 'but I don't like you mixing religion with excrement. Last night I saw part of the person you are referring to and it was not at all nasty.' (481)

Hobbes's *Leviathan* is composed of four parts: 'Of Man', 'Of Commonwealth', 'Of a Christian Commonwealth', 'Of the Kingdome of Darknesse'. In our age usually the last two are neglected, while the first two are the focus of reflection. Yet they are to be considered together as a whole. In fact Hobbes was addressing his contemporaries who lived in an imperfect and still young capitalist society. His main concern was providing them with a blueprint to peaceful and comfortable living, trying to convince them that if they transferred great part of their individual power to the sovereign they would avoid new civil wars and secure a safe life, which is the precondition for the exercise of all trades. The first part outlines the 'nature' of man, the second

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<sup>174</sup> Gary W. Seeman, *Individuation and Subtle Body, A Commentary on Jung's Kundalini Seminar*, Unpublished PhD thesis (2001), pp. 178-79.

deals with the 'State', the third and fourth take pains to delineate the true Christian doctrine against Papist superstition and abuse of power.

In dealing with man and the state Hobbes applied Galileo's 'resolutive-compositive' method, which had far-reaching implications for his vision of the 'State' and society at large:

[...] the resolutive stage of the Galilean method, as applied to political science, consisted in resolving political society into the motions of its parts--individual human beings--and resolving their motions in turn into imagined or hypothetical simple forces which, compounded, could be shown to explain them. [...] Hobbes's bold hypothesis was that the motion of the individual human beings could be reduced to the effects of a mechanical apparatus consisting of sense organs, nerves, muscles, imagination, memory, and reason, which apparatus moved in response to the impact (or imagined impact) of external bodies on it. (Macpherson: 1968, 27-8)

This determinist vision of the human being could not make much of the imagination, which was regarded merely as 'decaying sense', and could be either 'simple' or 'compounded' (*Leviathan*, Chapter Two). Here the ensemblist logic of *legein* and *teukhein* is at work, managing to disguise a specific form of the imaginary, the mechanical image of the world, as self-evident and utterly rational.

Starting from this conception of the human being, the 'State' is a compound, 'an artificial Man':

For by Art is created that great *Leviathan* called a *Common-wealth*, or *State*, (in latine *Civitas*) which is but an Artificiall Man; though of greater stature and strength than the Naturall, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which, the *Sovereignty* is an Artificial *Soul*, as giving life and motion to the whole body [...] (*Leviathan*, Introduction)

The State is thus a compound containing, or assembling all men in a certain society. This same logic of a mechanical sum of parts or 'limbs' making up a 'State' produces a monster, as it is infused with a superior power than that of the individuals who constitute it. The state becomes the 'State', a super-human, sovereign entity that is infused with a sort of mystical power and hovers somewhere between the material and the ghostly, what Taussig (1993) calls a specific form of 'state fetishism', the '*maleficium*':

By State fetishism I mean a certain aura of might as figured by the Leviathan or, in a quite different mode, by Hegel's intricately argued vision of the State as not merely the embodiment of reason, of the Idea, but also as an impressively organic unity, something much greater than its parts. (218)

It is precisely the coming together of reason and violence in the State that creates, in a secular and modern world, the bigness of the big S [...] (223, emphasis in the original.)

The *maleficio* [...] brings out the sacred sheen of the secular, and this ability is especially germane to an inquiry into State fetishism in that, as I have said, following Durkheim's view of the sacred, the pure and impure sacred are violently at odds and passionately interlocked at one and the same time. It is to this ability to draw out the sacred quality of State power, and to out-fetishize its fetish quality, that the *maleficium* - as I use it - speaks eons. (237)

Robert E. Stillman (1995) points out Hobbes' ambiguity, his 'battle against monstrous texts' (791) and metaphors through the employment of a more extreme metaphor.<sup>175</sup> He writes:

His writing is committed to perform for us (and ultimately, I will argue, to have us perform) a transformation of metaphor into logic - a transformation, it should be stressed from the start, that aims at a strangely *magical* event, the incarnation of sovereign power.

On many occasions, Hobbes effects the transformation of monstrous metaphor into geometric logic by erasing figures of speech through rational elaboration of their significance. Paraphrase is a great *purifier*. (800, emphasis mine)

In *Lanark* this ambiguous dimension is fully explored in the last book, describing the protagonist's political entanglement with the Institute, the Council and the 'Creature'. However, it is the 'Epilogue' that links up the monstrous character of state fetishism with the author's farcical illusionism:

'A conjuror!' said Lanark with loathing. 'A damned conjuror!' 'Yes,' said the conjuror humbly, 'I'm sorry. Please sit down and let me explain why the story has to go like this. [...]' (484)

'[...] Your survival as a character and mine as an author depend on us seducing a living soul in our printed world and trapping it here long enough for us to steal the imaginative energy which gives us life. To cast a spell over this stranger I am doing abominable things. I am prostituting my most sacred memories into the commonest possible

<sup>175</sup> Robert E. Stillman, 'Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Monsters, Metaphors and Magic', *ELH*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (Winter, 1995), pp.791-819.



words and sentences. When I need more striking sentences or ideas I steal them from other writers, usually twisting them to blend with my own. Worst of all I am using the great world given at birth - the world of atoms - as a ragbag of shapes and colours to make this second-hand entertainment look more amusing.' (485)

The printed world conjured up by the fictional author has the status of a fetish, hovering between the 'real world' and the intangible 'imaginary'. This is also an ironical reflection on the ambiguous relation between the author and his audience in a capitalist society, where the former has to spell-bind the readers in order to make a living and survive in a competing market. The author is no longer a seer, a high magician or priest of art, but a 'conjuror', who fakes magic for readers who ask just for that: there is a certain flavour of inauthenticity in this relation based on secular magic, on what Derrida has defined 'the magical assemblage'. The very employment and reworking of other authors' texts enacts that logic of assembling and constructing Castoriadis (1987) writes about. The stealing of the readers' 'imaginative energy' in the secondary world of words points to the parasitical character of the magic of fiction. How this 'magical assemblage' is achieved in the novel is the subject of the next section.

## 7.6 Textual Games and Logic in *Lanark*

Castoriadis' principles of *legein* and *teukhein* are embodied in, performed and thus exposed in their arbitrary character by the very way *Lanark* is 'assembled' together, while the points of artificial juncture of the narrative are left visible and exposed for the reader to reflect on. The novel requires that the reader engages with the textual game of what Iser (1993) – following Roger Caillois in *Les Jeux et les Hommes, le Masque et le Vertige* (1958) – calls *mimicry*. According to Caillois, *mimicry* applies to all those games where illusion, dissimulation of reality and simulation of another reality, parody, satire, transvestism, masks and roles are involved. Caillois has in mind the camouflages of the insect world, as the only rule of the game of mimicry is the continuous shift into an illusion which is accepted as more real than the real. While all fiction is mimicry, the double narrative of *Lanark* and Thaw is a wonderful example of it, as the author refracts 'reality' and magnifies it through fantastical lenses at the same time. The fantastical dimension is given as the

hyper-real one. The 'Epilogue' too is a meta-fictional masterpiece of mimicry, as we have seen through the illusionism of the fictional author.

On the other hand, the story of the Oracle that tells Lanark's life as Thaw is presented as separate from the rest of the narrative, but actually it has the function of debunking the conventions of realism and the claims of the omniscient narrator, as Rima's reply to Lanark at the end of the Oracle's account makes clear:

Rima said, 'what are you talking about?'  
 'The oracle's account of my life before Unthank. He's just finished off.'  
 Rima said firmly, 'In the first place that oracle was a woman, not a man. In the second place her story was about me. You were so bored that you fell asleep and obviously dreamed something else.' (357)

The depersonalization of the Oracle is carefully constructed through the account of how from human being it became just a disembodied voice. This tendency towards depersonalization and complete dependence on quantitative logic in contemporary societies is criticized at all levels in the novel.

As a writer and artist, Gray works with the imaginary, both individual and social, in a way that shows how the relationship between audience and author, as foregrounded in *Lanark*, is a multifaceted phenomenon. Readers come gradually to realize how they are being manipulated, amused and provoked at the same time in their role of consumers and co-creators of fiction. Their hidden desires are being played with at the interface between their private pleasure and public image. The importance of working with desire should not be underestimated in the shaping of both the social and the individual imaginary.

This same imaginary, in the sense outlined by Castoriadis, is worked with and reshaped still differently by Anna Maria Ortese and Daniel Kehlmann. The latter's novel *Measuring the World* is yet another example of mimicry. The structure of the novel is characterised by parallelism and convergence of the two protagonists' lives, with uncanny motifs cropping up at important points in the narrative. In *The Iguana* by Ortese the reader has to accept what Caillois (and Iser after him) calls *ilynx*, or vertigo, whereby the stability of perceptions is undermined and reality as we know it is annihilated. As we shall see next, in *The Iguana* the planes of 'reality' are continuously shifting and unreliable.

## 7.7 Strange Metamorphic Art: *The Iguana* and *The Tempest*

As Wood has pointed out,<sup>176</sup> Anna Maria Ortese's rejection of (Neo)-realism was due to what she considered its superficiality, because of its attempt to account only for the material side of existence, denying the convergence of biological and metaphysical concerns that she, on the contrary, makes tangible in the very figure of the iguana. Ortese is against 'dehumanizing capitalism' and its realist art, seen as a consequence of the 'corrupted ideals of the Enlightenment' (Wood: 1995, 183).

Apart from the themes, *The Iguana* explicitly pays homage to *The Tempest* by unfolding as a performative text where the action moves along with the ever-shifting identities of its characters and the uncanny atmosphere of the island. From the beginning to the end, the voice of the narrator addresses the 'Reader' in a way that undermines its reliability and omniscience, while drawing attention to its fictionality and the blanks resisting its own role in packaging the story. The theatrical aspects of *The Iguana* are evident in the descriptions of the island, its inhabitants and their house, 'una grigia e squallida costruzione a un sol piano, adorna, su un lato, di una torretta', 'parve al conte più un'indicazione di una casa, come usa nel modern teatro, che una vera abitazione' (2007: 28): 'a one-storey construction, ugly and grey, with a small tower against one side, which strikes Daddo 'less as a house than as a stage prop' (1987: 15).

In *The Iguana* 'conventions of time and space are put aside' (Wood: 1995, 175) and geography is more than a set of co-ordinates and maps: the geography of the oppression brought about by capitalism is reproduced in the distorted relations between the Marquis, the brothers Guzman and the iguana on the tiny island named Ocaña (after Manrique's example in *Coplas por la Muerte de su Padre*, a famous Spanish poem of the fifteenth century, directly quoted in the text, referring to a Spanish inland town of this name); it is also reminiscent of *Treasure Island* (1883) by Stevenson in the way its atmosphere is first described. Ortese's reworking of both Shakespeare's and Stevenson's imaginary islands—the latter destined to excite the passionate interests of children and adults alike—and their explicit transformation into a colonial setting is a comment not only on the power of money in general but also, indirectly, on the

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<sup>176</sup> Sharon Wood, "Such stuff as dreams are made on": Anna Maria Ortese (born 1914) and the Art of the Real' In *Italian Women's Writing 1860 – 1994* (London and Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Athlone, 1995), pp. 169-83.

state of the publishing industry in the present age. In fact, whereas Stevenson decided to write for a large audience and to please their taste for adventure, Ortese turns his island into a foil for the consideration of media's complicity into capitalist injustice.

The second part of the novel is called 'The Tempest', recalling to the reader's mind Shakespeare's play, also set on an eerie island, with the once-loved Caliban now rejected and enslaved by Prospero, whose name means in Italian 'wealthy, full of abundance'.

Italian writer Anna Maria Ortese published her novel *The Iguana* in 1965. In Italy her novel was apparently alien in its style, form and contents. As such, it was ostracized by the intellectual establishment and neglected. Yet Ortese saw much deeper into the matter when she declared later:

Già iniziava il decennio sessanta. Mi trasferii a Roma, in questo periodo, e scrissi un breve romanzo intitolato *L'iguana*. Era di scherno e protesta. Protesta nello stile—improvvisamente abbandonavo lo sgradito realismo di superficie—e scherno in quanto mostravo di prendere sul serio la insensatezza umana o di classe. Un brav'uomo va in un'isola—è molto ricco e può andare dovunque—e conosce un mostro. Lo prende come cosa possibile, e vorrebbe reintegrarlo—suppone ci sia stata una *caduta*—nella società umana, anzi Borghese, che ritiene il colmo della virtù. Ma si è sbagliato: perché il mostro è un vero mostro, anzi esprime l'animo puro e profondo dell'universo—di cui il signore non sa più nulla, tranne che è merce e vi possono apporvi cartellini col prezzo, e contrattare stelle e così via. La conclusione non era lieta (finiva in una rivolta della Natura), e dopo averci pensato un pochino, la sostituii con una più affabile e lieve, pensando così che il libro non desse nell'occhio ai critici da strapazzo, e si potesse vendere. Invece non si vendé ugualmente. (*Corpo Celeste*, 1997: 80)

The sixties were already starting. I moved to Rome then, and wrote a short novel called *The Iguana*. A novel expressing scorn and protest: the style expressed protest in that suddenly I abandoned the unpleasant superficiality of realism, and scorn in that I took seriously human or class foolishness. A good man sails to an island, since he is very rich and can go everywhere, and meets a monster. He thinks this is possible and would like to reintegrate it into the human, bourgeois society which to him is the height of virtue. He believes a *fall* has taken place, but he is wrong, because the monster is a real monster; rather it embodies the pure deep soul of the Universe, something he does not know any longer, except as a merchandize with price tags on, and the possibility of bargaining over stars and so forth. The end of the novel was not happy—it ended with nature's revolt—and after thinking about it, I replaced this end with a gladder and lighter one. In fact I thought that in this way the book would escape the attention

of third-rate critics and could be sold. Instead it did not sell any way.  
(My translation)

Here the author refers to an alternative conclusion which, in an interview of 1977, she described in the following way:

Il libro finiva, dopo tanto gioco e poesia, in un massacro. I fratelli Guzman, come in un sogno, azionavano un mitra, e il Conte così buono cadeva, senza mai svegliarsi dal suo sogno o peccato. Ma questa conclusione mi ispirò un terrore così grande, che la lasciai da parte. Preferii invece quella che è stata pubblicata, dove l'innamoramento è solo la maschera di una più profonda e vertiginosa attenzione: il Conte (Bontà generica, innocente, di 'classe') ha intravisto il vero, la degradazione e la segregazione dell'essere umano divenuto 'popolo' ma non può ammettere che sia altro che una bestia fantastica.<sup>177</sup>

After so much play and poetry, the book ended in a massacre. The brothers Guzman, as if in a dream, set in motion a machine-gun, and the good Count fell, without ever waking up from his dream or sin. But this conclusion inspired in me such a deep terror that I left it out. Instead I preferred the one which was published, where the Count's falling in love is only the mask of a more profound and giddy attention: the Count (who stands for the generic, innocent, 'class-conscious' Good) has had a glimpse of the real, the degradation and segregation of the human being who has become mere 'people', but cannot admit that it is other than a fantastical beast. (My translation)

*The Iguana* is a complex and multi-layered novel. One of its conspicuous themes is the critique of the Italian publishing industry located in Milan and catering for an audience hungry for the exotic. Ortese links this issue to the wider capitalist economy and particularly the estate market, with its hunger for new lands to turn into tourist resorts. By emphasizing this specific connection, Ortese explores some of the complexities of Italy's booming capitalism and the stirrings of the anti-colonialist movements.

The novel is composed of two sections: the first is entitled 'The Man who Buys Islands', the second is called 'The Tempest'. Throughout, Ortese reworks many of the concerns of Shakespeare's *Tempest*. After navigation along the Spanish and Portuguese coasts, the protagonist Aleardo, alias Daddo, Count of Milan, sees the outline of a horn-shaped island, which is not reported on nautical maps. Yet, his boatswain Salvato knows its name—Ocaña—and is reluctant to land there. He explains: 'No, non è segnata [...] perché, grazie a Dio, quelli che

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<sup>177</sup> Giovanni Giuga, 'Il mare non bagna la Liguria', in *La Fiera Letteraria*, 53, 107 (13 February 1977), pp. 8-9.

fanno le carte sono cristiani, e le cose del diavolo non le degnano' (2007: 23): 'It's not on the map because the people who make maps, thank God, are all Christians and don't much bother about things that belong to the devil' (1987: 11). Thus, the island is associated with the devil, much as *The Tempest's* unspecified island is linked to evil through Sycorax and her intercourse with the devil, which produced Caliban, the monster who reclaims the island as his own. (*The Tempest*, 1.2, ll. 331-332)

Daddo is a capitalist Prospero, whose magic is money, the fetish that can buy everything and change the relations among things, animals and humans. While Prospero is aware of his own position in the world, and proceeds to reveal it to Miranda (*The Tempest*, 1.2, ll. 58-61), Daddo is not, and sets out for his adventure with a feeling that a medieval knight might have shared (1987: 8). Prospero retains the power of magic through his books and uses it to justify and uphold his claims on the island. Daddo, instead, tries to relieve Ocaña's inhabitants of their sufferings resorting to gifts. However, his superficial compassion and unawareness prevent him from realizing his own role in perpetrating social injustice.

He meets the young Marquis of Segovia, Don Ilario Jimenez and his two uncouth half-brothers, as well as what appears to him 'una vecchia intenta a fare la calza' (2007: 24): 'an old woman busy with her knitting' (1987: 12). Don Ilario is a young, melancholic poet, characterised by 'già rovinata bellezza' (2007: 27): an 'already ruined beauty' (1987: 14), while, on looking closer, Daddo finds out that he was mistaken about the 'old woman':

Grande, a questo punto, fu la sorpresa del Daddo, nell'accorgersi che quella che egli aveva preso per una vecchia, altri non era che una bestiola verdissima e alta quanto un bambino, dall'apparente aspetto, di una lucertola gigante, ma vestita da donna, con una sottanina scura, un corsetto bianco, palesemente lacero e antico, e un grembialetto fatto di vari colori, giacché era la somma evidente di tutti i cenci della famiglia. In testa, a nascondere l'ingenuo muso verdebianco, quella servente portava una pezzuola anche scura. Era scalza. (2007: 29-30)

Daddo's surprise was tremendous. He had taken her for a shrunken old woman, but he was looking at an animal! In front of him was a bright green beast, about the height of a child--an enormous lizard from the look of her, but dressed in a woman's clothes with a dark skirt, a white corset, old and shabby, and a multicoloured apron clearly patch-worked from the family's stock of rags. To hide her ingenious

little snout, which was a sort of whitish green, she wore yet another dark cloth on her head. She was barefoot. (1987: 17)

This is, then, the master's first encounter with the oppressed, a 'beast', a word Ortese uses with a pointed and ironical compassion, to signify the unselfconsciousness of Nature. The novel unfolds through the continual metamorphoses of its characters. In particular, Don Ilario and the iguana are constantly shape-shifting in the eyes of the deluded Daddo, who only at the end of the novel is said to be 'guarito del suo carattere fantastico' (2007: 170): 'healed of his fantasizing mind' (1987: 181). His illness was his idealism, his failure to see 'che la grazia che lo incantava nelle creature delle isole, era costata a quelle creature l'autentico paradiso, il solo che conosciamo, il quale è sulla terra, e viene dato dietro versamento di denari' (2007: 169): 'that the charm he found so winning in the creatures of the islands had cost them their expulsion from the one authentic paradise, which is the only one we know, located here on the earth and with access conceded on payment of cash' (1987: 180-81).

Before the Count's delirium in the last part of the novel, whereby he sees himself as guilty of the attempted murder of God, the story explores the fascination and rejection which characterizes Daddo's and Ilario's relationship to the iguana. In fact Daddo and Ilario can be seen in this respect as each other's *alter ego*, in that the former's compassion and, later, passion, for the iguana, is counterpointed by the latter's indifference and cruelty towards her. In a chapter called 'Little Star', we learn about the iguana's fall from grace in Ilario's eyes. Once he had loved and fondled her, when a sudden change in his behaviour precipitated her into hell and into the dumb, desperate conviction of being the incarnation of evil itself. Here the contrasts with Caliban are revealing.

Caliban laments Prospero's change of attitude (*The Tempest*, I.2, ll. 332-339). While he learned Prospero's language, if only to curse him, the iguana cannot express herself and will never be able to master language, and thereby enter in the dimension of 'civilisation.' While in *The Tempest* Prospero justifies his rule with Caliban's wicked assault on Miranda, thus drawing on the discourse of the right of the 'civilised' to oppress the 'savage' in order to civilize him, in *The Iguana* Don Ilario, and later the archbishop interested in taking over the island as a profitable tourist resort, make use of the Manichean and Catholic concepts of evil, attributing all its characteristics to the poor iguana. The

motives of the archbishop, Don Ilario and his brothers, as well as the Hopins family, are far from pure and metaphysical. In fact, the Hopins, an American family that Ortese defines ‘Una Famigliola di Tipo Universale’ (2007: 88): ‘A Family of the Universal Type’ (1987: 85), represents the bourgeoisie interested in acquiring legitimacy and status by marrying her daughter to the poor aristocrat Don Ilario and saving his family from poverty in exchange for his aristocratic titles (1987: 86).

While in *The Tempest* Miranda is preserved for a lawful dynastic marriage, in *The Iguana* Don Ilario is both master and slave, he himself is ‘up for sale’ (1987: 83) and vulnerable to the archbishop’s scheming. At the end of the novel the ‘true’ iguana’s identity is revealed: ‘Non era un’iguana, e nemmeno una regina. Era una servetta come ce ne sono tante nelle isole [...]’ (2007: 172): ‘She was no iguana, nor even a queen. She was a servant girl like so many to be found on the islands [...]’ (1987: 184). However, her ‘little bestial soul’ remains unenlightened by culture. In spite of Daddo’s sacrifice being assimilated to Christ’s in the final invocation-prayer the brothers Guzman write to commemorate him and to please the iguana, the latter cannot be reached in her deepest natural core. Don Ilario’s brothers learn to read and write, but she has no mind for it and gets distracted easily. She clings to sentimentality and nostalgia for the Count Aleardo, without ever being able to be humanized.

The iguana represents to Daddo the longing for something long lost and vaguely remembered. In her many metamorphoses, Daddo sees her as a white clad *menina* at the bottom of the well and, later, in throwing away his life to save hers, he sees her thoroughly for what she is. He calls her ‘Perdita!’—the Italian for ‘loss,’ and a reference to *The Winter Tale*. Her own inarticulateness is nature itself, when not illumined by an enlightened and compassionate culture. Thus in Ortese’s assessment, ‘the pure natural’ is a nightmare of anguish, which, however, a utilitarian culture cannot redeem. Ortese’s critique of capitalism and the subsequent culture is radical and insightful. As we have already seen, she states her belief about the oppressed’s inability to speak for themselves in the first pages of the novel (2007: 18 and 1987:4).

Ortese’s feminism is more nuanced than it might be supposed. While her iguana stands for the state of nature and those oppressed by imperialism and the shackles of ‘civilisation’—in the novel aptly represented by the specifically Italian mixture of capitalist enterprise and Catholic religion—Ortese,



nonetheless, shows how this stupefied state of nature cannot be idealized, as it is synonymous with oppression, exploitation and pain. Thus, the novel upholds the need for a balance between nature and culture. However, the Feminine, in its vengeful upsurge, demands the very capitalist and well-meaning Count of Milan as a scapegoat. Ocaña remains a strange, windy island, which at the end produces a canto of the oppressed ironically different from the exotic and glamorous ones desired by the publisher Adelchi. A canto that, Ortese tells us, causes the little iguana-woman to break into laughter, as she ‘altro che in questo modo, o in altri più strambi, riusciva mai ad esprimere la forza del suo patire, della [...] inumana profondità del suo cuore’ (2007: 184): ‘since that was the only way, if not for others that were even stranger, in which she could ever express the force of her feelings, the force [...] of her heart’s inhuman depth’ (1987: 198).

As Marina Warner has remarked, ‘*The Tempest* sees a multiple restoration of patriarchal order according to Salic principles. Not only does Prospero regain his dukedom, but two daughters are given in marriage to become consorts of rulers, not rulers in their own right: Claribel to the king of Tunis and Miranda to Ferdinand, future king of Naples’.<sup>178</sup> Caliban, instead, is to remain on the island alone. In *The Iguana*, the archbishop does indeed manage to build a hotel for tourists. Yet, in spite of a few visitors, the island remains impervious, even if imprisoned in the impersonal workings of the money machine brought about by the unholy alliance of Church and bourgeoisie. In his delirium Count Aleardo feels

Che non ci sono iguane, ma solo travestimenti, ideate dall’uomo allo scopo di opprimere il suo simile e mantenuti da una terribile società. Questa società egli aveva espresso, ma ora ne usciva. Di ciò era contento. (2007: 168)

that there are no iguanas, but only disguises, disguises thought up by human beings for the oppression of their neighbours and then held in place by a cruel and terrifying society. He himself had been product and expression of such a society, but now he was stepping out of it. This made him content. (1987: 180)

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<sup>178</sup> Marina Warner, ‘The foul witch’ and Her ‘freckled whelp’: Circean Mutations in the New World’, in *‘The Tempest’ and Its Travels*, ed. by Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), pp. 97–113 (here p. 112).

In its critique of ‘civilization’ as conceived in modern capitalism, the novel displays a poignant irony and accusing tone, far beyond *The Tempest*’s intentions.

A few words remain to be said about the verbal magic peculiar to *The Tempest* and *The Iguana*. Magic is thematized explicitly in Shakespeare’s play as book-given power for Prospero and a ‘natural’, albeit demonical attribute in Sycorax. *The Iguana* plays with magic all along, by showing a world of shifting appearances and flux and by ironically and theatrically depicting the Catholic use of exorcism against the poor iguana. As in *The Tempest*, there is an opposition between the ‘natural’, ‘pagan’ enchantments of the island and the established, codified magic employed by either political or religious power: while dispossessed Prospero uses his magic to dominate the island, expose his enemies and regain his kingdom, in *The Iguana* Catholicism is satirized for playing with the oppressed by fostering superstition and subjection, in order to gain material advantages.

Ortese also employs fairy-tale motifs, such as, for example, a butterfly-God, and the well where Daddo has his epiphany about the iguana’s identity and significance. The iguana is a disempowered creature, without the magical power of a Sycorax, or the queenly appeal of a Miranda or Claribel. Yet, ‘quando aveva gridato: ‘Perdita!’, da quell momento tutti gli strazianti sortilege dell’isola, e la stessa sua malvagità, erano scomparsi’ (174): ‘from the moment he had cried ‘Perdita!’ all of the island desperate spells had broken, and even her mischievous perversity had vanished along with them’ (186). In *The Tempest*, Prospero’s fairy enchantments are conjuror tricks evoked to restore patriarchal justice. Yet, the native ‘subtleties o’ the isle’ (*The Tempest*, 5.1, l. 127) remain unchanged. While Prospero abjures his magic, Aleardo breaks the enchantments of the island by recognizing the iguana-woman. Ortese’s usage of such fairy-tale motifs is subversive, in that *The Iguana*, which she herself defined ‘romanzo-fiaba’, a sort of ‘fairy novel’, uses the real–fantastic interplay in a subtle manner: the author takes up the structure of the fairy-tale and includes it in the novel as a scaffolding, but the fantastic is presented as the plausible at the beginning, only to be displaced by the ‘hard facts’ of life at the end.

Although Ocaña is not on the maps, it cannot escape the global enmeshing of profit-making, while its inhabitants can be uplifted from their misery and poverty only partially. Still, the iguana-woman’s heart remains deep and

‘inhuman’, a word that for Ortese conveys the profound mystery of the Universe. Daddo, unlike Prospero, never returns to Milan and his mundane life, but rests like a sleeping beauty in a little chapel on the island, lulled by the ocean. Only, the iguana-woman cannot awaken him again.

## 7.8 Oppression, Flux and Death in *The Iguana*

The fifteenth chapter, ‘Little Star’, tells of the state of grace of the iguana: a state of symbiosis, when she called the Marquis ‘dad’ and without looking her own image reflected in a mirror, she feels beautiful:

L’Iguanuccia è fuori di sé dall’orgoglio e la soddisfazione. Non si è mai guardata in uno specchio da quando è nata, ma non importa: sa di essere bella, ora, bellissima, e, come una figlia dell’uomo, ne è beata. Ogni cosa che lei fa, ogni passo, ogni occhiata, ogni inconsapevole attuccio, sembra gradito al marchese più della primavera medesima o di una corona regale. (2007: 124)

The Iguana was beside herself with pride and satisfaction. Never from the time of her birth had she looked at herself in a mirror, but that didn’t matter: she knew she was beautiful, and now extremely beautiful, and as for every daughter of mankind her beauty was a beatification. Everything she did, her every step, each and every one of her unassuming, uncontrived and unconscious actions, seemed to give the Marquis more pleasure than spring itself or a regal crown. (1987: 127)

To this state of grace, a fall follows. We know the very Marquis falls ill and rejects her. Thus illness, the state of disconnection, denial and lethargy has fatal consequences for the iguana but leads to the Marquis’ decline too. To this blissful state of relational being without mirrors that mediate between the self and its own self-apprehension, it is possible to contrast the night scene when Daddo sees the rejuvenated Marquis looking into a mirror.

Under the moonlight the Marquis turns into a magnificent youth, but his metamorphosis, far from being a return to grace, is deceptive and artificial, made in order to entice the Hopins and secure a convenient marriage. The looking-glass has exactly the function to point to the masking of his demise and humiliation, reflecting an image that he will have to sell in order to restore his material condition.

Ocaña, once a paradise, is another silent victim of unequal power relations, whereas Milan is the embodiment of the wealthy capitalist 'centre', where the new publishing industry is flourishing. Daddo is both a son of that progressive city and also a simple soul, an idealist, although he belongs to the class of the oppressors. Ilario is noble by descent but is poor, oppressed and oppressor in turn, in the same way as the brothers Guzman are both yokels and humane. All the characters, apart from the Hopins and the bishop, are in constant flux, their identities cannot be defined in a one-sided way. The iguana is the apotheosis of this continuous process of transformation and shifting identities: she is declared to be an iguana at the beginning of the novel, while towards the end of it the reader and Daddo himself recognize in her a poor girl. Daddo, during his descent into the well, calls her Perdita and sees in her a *menina* in waiting, an image that recalls to mind Velasquez's eponymous picture. Perdita, the monkey, and the iguana, thus seem to blend into each other, and into the emblem of loss: the little girl at the bottom of the well waiting to be saved is also what has been loved, cast away and rejected in an increasingly alienated life, fuelled by a terribly oppressive society. She represents pure otherness, the uncanny dimension once familiar, now lost to human comprehension, so much unreachable even to an idealist like Daddo as to provoke his death.

With Daddo, we are still dealing with idealism, the positing of the loftiness of the thinking and feeling 'I'. Yet, this 'I' feels the impossibility of the objectifying thrust in the form of compassion for an anthropomorphic iguana or a theriomorphic girl. The iguana is not a proper subject, but the Count cannot treat her as an object either: she is the ambiguous monster repressed and yet made possible by modernity, the voiceless oppressed of the earth. Therefore, although he falls in love with her, and offers to be her husband and loving father in turn, Daddo cannot relate to her, that is, cannot *feel* her identity. He is compassionate and romantic in his idealism to the point of self-sacrifice and this will give the iguana-girl a new hope but not a fully human redemption.

The moment of realization leads Daddo to death, indeed as Kleinhaus has pointed out, the undercurrent of the whole novel is Daddo's preparation and encounter with death: the various conversations between him and Ilario hint at death, and Manrique's poetic lines highlight its pivotal centrality at various

stages of the narrative, particularly in the middle of the novel.<sup>179</sup> Death is indeed the other monster repressed by modernity, yet it brings Daddo a revelation, an epiphany about himself and the world he lives in, albeit without allowing him to establish a sustained interpersonal engagement with the iguana and the other characters.

### 7.8.1 Ortese's Poetics and *The Iguana's* Structure

Although Pietro Citati has defined the novel as a 'romantic fable',<sup>180</sup> Kleinhaus has talked of an allegory and Farnetti and Du Merac have stated that it is an example of feminine fantastic. *The Iguana* baffles every single definition because of its complexity and non-canonical state. Luca Clerici in his biography of Ortese (2002: 399) defines the novel 'un'antifiaba sperimentale' (an avant-garde anti-fairytale).<sup>181</sup> I have shown how this high originality responds to the author's conscious rejection of over-trodden traditions and literary trends and to her conviction of the metaphysical strangeness and complexity of the real, something which is always in flux and cannot be constrained in rigid categories and neat distinctions. Indeed her depiction of hybrid situations and characters that double up is a hallmark of magical realism, whose strategies, however, she uses only to rework into a unique whole.

If we consider her statements in *Corpo Celeste*<sup>182</sup> (1997) about nature and society, her poetics will appear clearly defined: nature and society have to be thought out anew, they have to be recreated in order to become a 'second nature', capable of raising man and his existence beyond the horror of pure nature, or what we may call 'nature-nature'. Thus her need for 'espressività' (the need to struggle in order to give birth to expression and not be lost into the blue sea of the unarticulated and impossible to be expressed) is part of this recreation of a 'second nature', where reason has the function of 'illuminare il disordine e il dolore': 'illuminating disorder and pain' (*Corpo Celeste* 1997: 103).

These statements cast a new light on the iguana, which too often has been seen as an apotheosis of nature: in fact, the iguana-girl is a monster hoping to be raised above pain and dejection but never achieving that recreation, that

<sup>179</sup> Martha Kleinhaus, "'Schlafende See,' erinn're dich..." In *Italienisch, Zeitschrift fuer Italienische Sprache und Literatur* 32 (November 1994), Frankfurt am Main: Diensterweg, 18-36.

<sup>180</sup> Pietro Citati, *La principessa dell'isola*, Postfazione a *L'Iguana* (Milano: Adelphi, 2007), pp. 197-204.

<sup>181</sup> Luca Clerici, *Apparizione e Visione, Vita e Opere di Anna Maria Ortese* (Milano: Mondadori, 2002).

<sup>182</sup> Anna Maria Ortese, *Corpo Celeste* (Milano: Adelphi, 1997), p.100.

condition of 'second nature' that only aware self-expression can bring about. Indeed, in the same *Corpo Celeste*, Ortese talks of being a woman writer as being an impossible monster, 'una bestia che parla': 'a talking beast' (1997: 51). Here, in her consciousness of her own difference as a woman and a writer, Farnetti<sup>183</sup> has seen the mark of her belonging to a feminine tradition. However, it is apparent that Ortese's writing is beyond any 'feminine tradition', as she struggles to reach the shore of espressività by personal means that she has had to craft by herself. Indeed, as a girl she reads D'Annunzio and Leopardi, later Poe, Stevenson, Borges, Conrad, Dickens also the Russian, American and French novelists, but the only feminine name mentioned is that of Katherine Mansfield, from whom, however, she distances herself with humility. As a woman writer whose activity spanned almost the entire twentieth-century, from Fascism down to the Nineties, she faces the problem of a lack of tradition; hers is a story of fight and conquest of expressive means that are denied to her because she comes from 'a family of no social distinction'.

She conceives of 'reason' as a positive force, opposed to the pseudo-intelligence of industrialism and mass production. The writing of *The Iguana* is her reaction to the levelling of art and literary language in the new wave of the economic boom:

Andai per un po' a Roma, e scrissi una fiaba, un romanzo-fiaba, e lo volli difficile per reazione all'atroce linguaggio corrente. Una creatura mezzo bestia, mezzo umana, (come io vedevo buona parte dell'umanità) era al centro--e parlava in modo umano, ma infantile, compassionevole. Questo libro, *L'iguana*, piacque a qualche critico, ma come sempre, come era stato con i precedenti, io non raggiungevo i mille lettori. Non si parlava più l'italiano in Italia, e chi lo parlava lo scriveva anche, e quindi, ammirato, non leggeva che se stesso. (*Corpo celeste*: 1997, 48-9).

I went to Rome for a while, and I wrote a fairy-tale, a novel which was also a fairy-tale ('romanzo-fiaba'), and I wanted it to be difficult as a reaction to the awful common language. At its centre there was a creature which was half a beast and half human (as I saw a great part of humanity), and she talked as a human being but in a childish, compassionate way. A few critics liked this book *The Iguana*, but as always with my preceding books, I could not attract a thousand readers. In Italy nobody spoke proper Italian any longer, and those

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<sup>183</sup> Monica Farnetti, 'Anxiety-Free: Rereadings of the Freudian 'Uncanny'', in Billiani Francesca and Gigliola Sulis (eds.), *The Italian Gothic and Fantastic, Encounters and Rewritings of Narrative Traditions* (Madison, 2007: Teaneck Fairleigh Dickinson University Press), pp. 46-56.

who did speak and write it, admiringly, read only themselves (My translation).

From a structural point of view, *The Iguana* employs many devices which can be found in many post-colonial magic realist texts, such as an innocent focalizer, represented by Daddo, the monster, animal-girl, many catalyst objects, that is, objects that have the function of conveying the ambiguous message of a two-sided reality (particularly mirrors, but also the hat with red feathers, the well, and the white butterfly representing God), a juggling of different planes of reality, and a conflation of different literary genres, from fable to allegory, to social critique. All these characteristics work together and posit the problem of the possibility of knowing the empirical world. In fact together with the afore mentioned elements, *The Iguana* also makes use of a shifting focalizer, Daddo and an anonymous heterodiegetic narrator alternate their narratives irregularly, and in some cases they seem to coalesce, so that the reader receives a strange impression of estrangement and empathy at the same time. When the narrator claims that s/he is not able to give any further details about Daddo's condition and whereabouts during his revealing madness (chapters XX-XXIV), the reader knows the narrator is not entirely reliable, either. Latin American author Marquez, when remembering the way his grandmother told her impossible stories, said that she had a deadpan facial expression, and that he strove to recreate that effect in his magical realist fiction. Indeed to the matter-of-fact tone of much magical realist fiction Ortese substitutes a sense of aching wonder. Her approach is also quite different from the 'lucid amazement' theorised by Massimo Bontempelli, an Italian writer active in the first decades of the twentieth century, who propounded magic realism in fiction in his *L'Avventura Novecentista*<sup>184</sup> and played a role in the publication of Ortese's first collection of short stories *Angelici Dolori*.

### 7.8.2 Massimo Bontempelli's 'Realismo Magico' and Anna Maria Ortese's: Differences and Similarities

Although Massimo Bontempelli plays a key role in the publication of Ortese's first collection of stories *Angelici Dolori* in 1937, it is difficult to trace any direct

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<sup>184</sup> Massimo Bontempelli, 'L'Avventura Novecentista' In *Realismo Magico e altri scritti sull'arte* (Milano: Abscondita, 2006).

influence of his ideas on the young Anna Maria. It is true that, from the very start, he has words of praise for her work, which in his opinion bridges the gap between prose and poetry, skilfulness and creative inspiration, but he imposes his own agenda on Ortese's rather different poetics. However, it is useful to compare Bontempelli's idea of magical realism with Ortese's writing practice in order to highlight differences and similarities between the two, and reflect on the non-canonical status of Ortese's peculiar brand of magical realism.

First of all, Bontempelli talks of believing in the re-establishment of 'un Tempo e uno Spazio oggettivi e assoluti': 'objective and absolute Time and Space' (2006: 15), whereby the individual can find himself again in a new objectivity of his environment. Ortese, on the other hand, has a profound perception of time and space as a revelation, an ecstatic experience showing the transiency of human experience and dwelling on the earth. In *Corpo Celeste* she voices her amazement at being alive on earth, which she calls a 'heavenly body', a 'corpo celeste'. There she goes on to criticize the intellect, which has robbed reason of its throne, and states that Space and Time are the very breath of any culture worthy of that name. Space and Time are the 'External', a galactic dimension of the universe, where 'apparition' becomes possible through time seen as 'durata' (the time span experienced in its extension): 'substantially, in the dumb and inexplicable 'strangeness' of the universe, in this estranging reality without signs or directions, without names, the only chance given to man is the 'apparition', that is the 'second nature' or 'reason', which illuminates and collects the inner and peculiar pain of human consciousness. In other words, it is this kind of *apparition* that can give name, identity, presence to the world, through the rising and spreading of the 'espressività', which is conquest of the 'second nature' through the word.'<sup>185</sup>

Indeed in *The Iguana*, Ilario talks about the lack of a demarcation line between real and unreal, and Ortese uses many devices in order to play on this theme. On the island modern time conventions are not respected and the dates reported are unreal, while the brothers Guzman manage to arrive too quickly at the mansion, notwithstanding the large space separating it from the beach, so that Daddo thinks about the possibility of a subterranean passage. Together with an ambiguous playfulness with the dimensions of time and space, the logic of the double, the multiplying personalities of all the characters, and the use of

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<sup>185</sup> Giancarlo Borri, *Invito alla lettura di Anna Maria Ortese* (Milano, 1988: Mursia), p. 90, my translation.



estranging objects such as mirrors, the well, coloured pebbles as mock-money, all work towards the overall effect of strangeness that Ortese wants to show at the heart of reality itself.

Ortese and Bontempelli both talk about the prominent role of imagination but give different meanings to this faculty. The latter thinks that the task of imagination is to dominate and rule over nature: magic is the essence of this force, and the creation of objects which will be used to modify the features of the world is the artist's aim. The artist has to become anonymous and go beyond beauty and the exploration of inner feelings, which to Bontempelli seem mainly feminine characteristics of art. He has in mind a masculine art, where architecture is the leading example. The poet has to invent new stories and myths which will go in the world quite apart from his personal fame. He talks about the magic of daily life and the aim of lucid amazement as contrasted with a sense of wonder. The latter is, in his opinion, typical of children and primitives. In contrast to this, Ortese thinks that imagination *is* the real, and the real is imagination, that wonder and amazement are one and the same response to the magic inside reality, not as a human force that man can exert on nature in order to dominate it. Indeed, Ortese wants to go past the old dualism of spirit and nature Bontempelli still relies on. They agree about the mystery inside the ordinary and the 'necessity to tell the dream as if it were real and tell reality as if it were a dream' (Bontempelli: 2006, 51, my translation), but they have opposite convictions about the means to realize this vision.

Bontempelli's novel *Lo specchio dietro alla scacchiera* (*The mirror behind the chess-board*) is an example of his magical realism, where the world of objects and artefacts has an independent existence from human life, and where the atmosphere is of lucid irony and detachment. In Ortese's *The Iguana*, on the contrary, a certain outraged empathy always emerges out of the narrative texture, a sense of empathic, albeit distant, watching of the uncanny phenomena of the world.

Another major difference is the two writers' attitudes towards the audience. Bontempelli supports the idea of applied art and writing for an audience, while Ortese has always found difficult to sacrifice her need for *espressività* to the requirements of the publishing industry and the public's taste.

### 7.8.3 Reason and Double Sight: Ortese's Animalism and her 'Non-Christian Christology'

As Luca Clerici has pointed out in an interview with Antonio Motta,<sup>186</sup> most critics have concentrated on the 'fantastic' in Ortese's work and have left out the meaning of her 'radical animalism'. Her view of nature is compassionate, albeit somewhat pessimistic: to Clerici her vision of nature is that of a 'macchina cieca e perciò feroce' (a blind, fierce machine): 'il valore 'salvifico' della compagine sociale sta proprio qui, nell'arginare lo strapotere nefasto della natura sugli individui e sulla collettività': 'The saving purpose of society consists in the containment of the awful power nature exerts on individuals and communities alike'. However, Ortese's feelings towards nature are more complex and nuanced.

Ortese sees in the French Revolution the historical moment when calculating and selfish intelligence replaced reason, conceived as an intuitive knowledge of natural laws which enabled human beings to live in harmony with nature itself. Thus, on one hand nature is not being idealized: precisely because of the pain inherent in it, it is necessary for men to re-establish their contact to it; on the other hand, society has to be re-founded anew according to the principles of Ortesian 'reason' (not the abstract reason of the Enlightenment) rather than those of intellect. She writes in *Corpo Celeste*:

la Ragione non agisce, vede, solo l'intelligenza agisce. E l'intelligenza paludata di Ragione, aveva giurato di agire e fondare la libertà democratica: che non è la libertà del Respiro. (1997: 142)

Reason does not act, it sees, while intellect acts. And intellect only cloaked by Reason had sworn she would act and found democratic freedom, which is not the freedom of Breathing. (My translation)

Thus for Ortese the visionary power of Reason is of paramount importance and the freedom which is envisioned through it corresponds to the Breath itself, the pulsing rhythm of life in all creatures. In another passage of *Corpo Celeste*, Ortese declares about nature:

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<sup>186</sup> Antonio Motta, *Apparizione e Visione Vita e Opere di Anna Maria Ortese* di Luca Clerici, interview with the author, 'Incroci, semestrale di letteratura e altre scritture' (2002).

L'Universo—o gli Universi—sembrano dunque il vero Irreale, il luogo non pensabile o non pensato. E davanti ad esso, anche la natura della terra—la flora, la fauna, entro l'atmosfera, le acque—diviene, così già a lungo pensata dalla ragione, e così certamente dolorosa nella sua catena di necessità, e di sopravvivenza del più nuovo e del più forte, diviene un po' umana. Spesso, matrice di umano e specchio della stessa ragione. Vediamo straordinarie illuminazioni nella natura, solidarietà da creatura a creatura, e consapevolezza, in ogni creatura, appena interrogate, quasi a livello di sogno. Sí, la natura—animali, alberi—sono l'uomo senza la difesa dell'intelligenza razionale, sono l'uomo *senza tempo, l'uomo che sogna*. Così, chi sottomette con durezza, o mercifica, o tormenta comunque la Natura, nei suoi figli che dormono, o la guarda senza pietà o fraternità, è ancora e sempre il terribile uomo-natura, uomo-pietra, l'uomo appunto *che dorme*. La ragione non sottomette né mercifica nulla. Ma eleva tutto alla propria comprensione, e la propria comprensione mette a disposizione di ogni vivente. (1997: 102-3)

The Universe, or Universes, *seems* to be the authentic Unreal, the unthinkable place, that which is not thought. Before it, even earth's nature, flora, fauna, in the atmosphere and the waters, becomes somewhat human after being thought for so long by Reason, albeit it is so undoubtedly painful in its chain of ineluctable events and its law of the survival of the fittest and newest. Often it is matrix of what is human and a mirror of reason itself. We can see wonderful illuminations in nature, a loving bond from creature to creature, a dreamy awareness, just touched upon, in every creature. Yes, nature, animals and trees *are* man without the defence of rational intelligence; they *are timeless* man, *man that is dreaming*. Thus, whoever dominates or sells, or is cruel to Nature, to her sleeping children, or looks at her without piety or brotherly love, is still and always the awful man-nature, man-stone, therefore *sleeping* man. Reason does not dominate nor sell anything. It raises everything to the level of its understanding and makes this understanding available to each living creature. (My translation)

Thus Reason, the 'second nature', has a demiurgic role of recreation of the real, a dimension where the relations between man and nature can be reshaped entirely. When man acts without awareness and mistreats nature he is still nature himself, in its most awful aspect, that of unconsciousness and violence, whereas, when Reason illuminates the world, man becomes truly human:

Quando [...] dai il mondo come spiegato, per così dire: naturale, ci edifichi sopra le cose degli uomini. Quando lo dai come inspiegabile, cioè innaturale, e lo definisci come visione del fuggevole, ci edifichi l'uomo. Non è una differenza da poco. Edificare l'uomo è gratuito. Edificare le cose (dell'uomo e sull'uomo) porta compensi molto alti non solo economici. Ma perde l'uomo. (1997: 103-4)

When [...] you take the world as already given and explained, as *natural*, you build men's things onto it. But when you take it as inexplicable, that is *unnatural*, and you define it as a vision of something fleeing and transient, you build man on it. This is no small difference. Building things for man and on man brings high rewards not only in economic terms. But it loses man. (My translation)

In pointing to the necessary link between man and natural creatures, beyond any romanticism, Ortese identifies evil in the pain we cause to other living beings:

il male è prima di tutto il dolore che infliggiamo a un altro—all'altro bestia, bambino, vecchio, malato, straniero, povero—sicuri che debba e possa accettarlo solo perché noi possiamo, tramite il suo dolore, sentirci più liberi, più viventi, felici e sicuri della nostra vita. (*Corpo Celeste*, p. 10)

Evil is first and foremost the pain we cause to another, to the other: animal, child, to the elderly, the sick, the stranger, the poor, in the certainty that he must and can accept it, only because we can go on, thanks to his pain, to feel freer, more alive, happier and more secure in our own life. (My translation)

What she is identifying here is the logic of the scapegoat that has taken place, at different times, in the history of humankind. The brutal killing of the scapegoat is indeed what makes possible life for the rest of society, and seems to be justified by the victim's difference, her liminal condition which turns her into a monster in the eyes of the majority, whose power is based in a consensual view of the laws and characteristics of reality. Thus Ortese is exposing the very necessities of the 'modern' condition, where the forbidden hybrid and the rejected monster are necessary for the survival of its mechanisms: 'modernity' is a machine but it is not entirely dependent on pure, inanimate objects and mechanisms; indeed the very principle, that of organic and sentient matter to subdue and dominate, that makes its life possible, is also the broken link in the chain, that allows a leaking, a *perdita*, and in the long run exposes its hidden and contradictory workings. These in turn show that man has never truly left the same anthropological matrix, but has only masked it. *Perdita*, the reader will remember, is the name of Ilario's first love, a little monkey, and then the name that Daddo gives to the iguana inside the well: a possible interpretation is that what is being shown is the very nature-culture, whereby interwoven

metaphysical and biological ‘presence’ is waiting to be redeemed from the pain caused by the sweeping currents of history with its selfish interests.

Ortese’s critique of the Enlightenment and its consequences is ironically present in the depiction of ‘a family of the universal type’ (85), the Hopins, who represent the typical bourgeois family created by wealthy unconsciousness and selfishness in contemporary society, and also the greedy archbishop, who represents the arrogance of the institutionalized Church.

Indeed Ortese’s social critique invests both lay and religious institutions, but a Christological destiny is allotted to the protagonist of *The Iguana*: Daddo dies in the attempt to rescue the iguana-girl, whose hybrid nature however cannot be erased nor mitigated. He manages to restore her hope of a far distant redemption in the future and the last poem, written by the Guzman brothers in order to please the iguana-girl, is a prayer to the Count, who is called here the ‘Count of Christ’ and is invoked as the saviour of the humblest creatures at the bottom of the well: the snake, the cow, the frog and others.

Ortese’s strong animalism is also visible in the scene of the trial for the death of God, where she writes:

Era, Lettore, se mai sei stato desideroso di conoscere le vere sembianze di colui del quale favoleggiamo da secoli, senza mai essere certi di averlo ravvisato, era, arrampicata e addormita su una foglia, una semplice farfalla bianca. (2007: 164)

Surely you’ve longed to know the true semblance of this Being whom the centuries have surrounded with fables while leaving us always uncertain of having been faced with the undeniable. What lay there, curled up on a leaf and asleep, was a simple white butterfly. (1987: 174)

This depiction of God as an aerial and fragile being is well suited to Ortese’s belief that ‘freedom is a breath’, is life in its sacred preciousness and fragility.

In her subsequent and last two novels, *Il cardillo addolorato* (*The Sorrowing Goldfinch*) and *Alonso e i Visionari* (*Alonso and the Visionaries*), the theme of the scapegoat and of the ultimate sacrifice recurs, and particularly in the latter the Christological destiny is transferred onto a ghostly puma, a little and defenceless beast, whose death and return evokes Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection. Only, in this case, Ortese finds impossible to attribute a Christ-like nature to a human being and ends up thinking that the truly innocent and

therefore perfect victim and rescuer is a mild little puma cub. *The Iguana* is a novel whose vision Ortese develops in the two later novels, which for this reason have been considered as part of a ‘fantastic animal trilogy’. Yet the three works present such different characteristics that the definition cannot be applied without problems.

In the same way bracketing Ortese’s work within the frame of the ‘fantastic’ is limiting: *The Iguana* is a complex and multilayered novel, which encompasses different literary genres and modes, from the fantastic to magical realism, to allegory and in so doing it gives voice to Ortese’s unique conception of the real, nature and reason. I have tried to unravel some of the major threads woven in the lively tapestry of the narrative, and I have maintained that her use of magical realist conventions and their subsequent subversion responds to her need to express the uncanny character which constitutes the essence of the world, once the mechanisms of ‘modernity’ are exposed. I have also shown in some detail how themes and structure of the novel correspond to each other, as Ortese tries to express the fluent and transient character of the reality which runs underneath the bare lines of the story of the protagonist Daddo.

Reality, Ortese says, has to be thought into being; thereby the artificial features of what is ordinarily conceived by the word ‘reality’ emerge on the surface of consciousness and this fake ‘real’ is turned upside down and shown in its utter conventionality.

## **7.9 *Measuring the World*: ‘Die Fremdheit ist Ungeheuer’**

In the chapter ‘The River’ Alexander von Humboldt and his colleague Bonpland have dinner with the Jesuit Father in charge of a mission in the Amazonian forest. Pater Zea’s long story about the futility of measuring the earth deserves to be quoted at some length:

Linien gebe es überall, sagte Humboldt. Sie sein eine Abstraktion. Wo Raum an sich sei, seien Linien.  
Raum an sich sei anderswo, sagte Pater Zea.  
Raum sei überall!  
Überall sei eine Erfindung. Und den Raum an sich gebe es dort, wo Landvermesser ihn hintrügen. Pater Zea schloss di Augen, hob sein Weinglas und stellte es wieder ab, ohne daraus getrunken zu haben.

Die drei Männer [die Landvermesser La Condamine, Bouguer und Godin] hätten unvostellbar genau gearbeitet. Trotzdem hätten ihre Daten nie übereingestimmt. [...] Eine Wut ohne Grund und Ziel sei über die Männer gekommen. [...] Täglich habe es Streit gegeben, bis Godin den Degen gezückt haben und davongestolpert sei in den Urwald. Das gleiche, ein paar Wochen später, zwischen Bouguer und La Condamine. [...] Man müsse sich das vorstellen. Derart zivilisierte Herren mit Allongeperücken, Lorgnons und parfümierten Taschentüchern! La Condamine habe es am längsten ausgehalten. Acht Jahre im Wald, geschützt von nur einer Handvoll fieberkranker Soldaten. Er habe Schneisen geschlagen, die zugewachsen seien, sobald er sich abgewandt habe, Bäume gefällt, welche schon in der nächsten Nacht wieder in die Luft geragt hätten; und dennoch, halsstarrig, habe er nach und nach ein Zahlennetz über die widerstrebende Natur gezwungen. Er habe Dreiecke gezogen, deren Winkelsumme sich allmählich den hundertachtzig genähert, und Bögen trianguliert, deren Krümmung schliesslich sogar dem Flirren der Luft widerstanden habe. Dann habe er einen Brief der Akademie erhalten. Die Schlacht sei verloren, der Beweis in Newtons Sinn geführt, die Erde abgeplattet, die ganze Arbeit umsonst. [...]

So sei, sagte Pater Zea, der geschlagene Mann eben heimgefahren. Vier Monate lang, einen noch immer namenlosen Fluss entlang, den er erst später Amazonas getauft habe. Unterwegs habe er Karten gemalt, den Bergen Namen gegeben, die Temperatur verzeichnet, die Arten der Fische, Insekten, Schlangen und Menschen erfasst. Nicht weil es ihn interessiert habe, sondern um den Verstand zu bewahren. Niemals habe er danach in Paris über die Dinge geredet, an die der eine oder andere seiner Soldaten sich noch erinnert habe: die kehligen Laute und perfekt gezielten Giftpfeile aus dem Unterholz, die nächtlichen Lichterscheinungen, vor allem aber *jene winzigen Verschiebungen in der Wirklichkeit, wenn die Welt für Momente einen Schritt ins Irreale gemacht habe. Dann hätten zwar die Bäume noch wie Bäume, die träge strudelnden Wasser wie Wasser ausgesehen, aber man habe es schauernd als Mimikry von etwas Fremdem erkannt.* In dieser Zeit habe La Condamine auch den Kanal gefunden, von dem der verrückte Aguirre berichtet habe. Die Verbindung der zwei grössten Flüsse des Kontinents.

Er werde beweisen, dass sie existiere, sagte Humboldt.

Alle grossen Ströme seien verbunden. Die Natur sei ein Ganzes.

Ach ja? Pater Zea wiegte zweifelnd den Kopf. Jahre später, als La Condamine, längst Akademiemitglied und alt und berühmt, nur mehr selten schreiend erwacht sei und es angeblich sogar wieder fertiggebracht habe, an Gott zu glauben, habe er selbst den Kanal für einen Irrtum erklärt. Zwischen grossen Flüssen, habe er gesagt, gebe es keine Verbindung im Inland. So etwas brächte den Kontinent in eine Unordnung, die seiner nicht würdig wäre. Pater Zea schwieg einen Moment, dann stand er auf und verbeugte sich. Träumen Sie gut, Baron. Und wachen Sie gut auf! (2005: 115-18, my emphasis)

Lines happened everywhere, said Humboldt. They were an abstraction. Wherever there was space as such, there were lines.

Space as such was elsewhere, said Pater Zea.

Space was universal!

Being universal was an invention. And space as such happened where surveyors put it. [...] The three men [the surveyors La Condamine, Bouguer and Godin] had worked with extraordinary precision [in order to measure the equator]. Nonetheless, their data never matched. [...] An unfathomable, pointless rage had overcome the men. [...] There were daily battles, until Godin drew his sword and staggered away into the primeval forest. Two weeks later, the same thing happened between Boguer and La Condamine. [...] Imagine! Such civilized men, with full perukes, lorgnones, and scented handkerchiefs! La Condamine held out the longest. Eight years in the forest, protected by a mere handful of fever-ridden soldiers. He had cut trails which grew back again as soon as he turned his back, felled trees that resprouted the next night, and yet, little by little, with stiff-necked determination, he had forcibly imposed a web of numbers over reluctant nature. He had drawn triangles which gradually approximated a sum of a hundred and eighty degrees and triangulated arcs whose curves finally stood strong even in the shimmering heat. Then he received a letter from the Academy. The battle was lost, the proof followed Newton, the earth was indeed oblate, all his work had been in vain. [...]

And so, said Pater Zea, the beaten man went home. Four months to travel down a still-nameless river, which he only later christened the Amazon. On the way he painted maps, gave mountains names, tracked the temperature, and worked out the species of fishes, insects, snakes, and humans. Not because it interested him, but in order to stay sane. Afterwards, back in Paris, he never talked about the things that one or another of his soldiers remembered: the throaty sounds and perfectly aimed poisoned arrows that came flying out of the undergrowth, the nocturnal glows, but above all *the miniscule displacements of reality, when the world crossed over into otherworldliness for a few moments. At such times the trees looked like trees and the slowly swirling water looked like water, but it was mimicry, it was something foreign, and it caused a shudder.* It was at this time that La Condamine also found the channel that mad Aguirre had spoken of. The channel connecting the two greatest rivers on the continent.

He would prove its existence, said Humboldt. All great rivers are connected. Nature was a unity.

Oh yes? Pater Zea shook his head sceptically. Years later, when La Condamine, long since a member of the Academy and old and famous, was able (mostly) to wake from sleep without screaming and once again to make himself believe in God, he declared the channel to be an error. Great rivers, he said, had no inland connection. Such a thing would be a disorder of nature, and unworthy of a great continent. Pater Zea fell silent for a moment, then got to his feet and bowed. Dream well, Baron, and wake in good health! (2007: 96-8, my emphasis)

This lengthy episode embeds Kehlmann's poetics: reality as uncanny mimicry, as the alienating mirror image of itself, unconquered and unconquerable. Mimicry



is intended as nature's strategy of resistance to human attempts at penetration and control. Chaos lurks behind human conceptions of order and rationality. The futility of Humboldt's own attempts is foregrounded with irony throughout the novel; however, it is in the episode of Humboldt's voyage to the Russian steppes that the vacuity of the whole enterprise is shown in its macabre monotony:

Humboldt hatte in so vielen Kutschen gedöst, war von so vielen Pferden gezogen worden und hatte so viele krautbewachsene Ebenen gesehen, die immer dieselbe Ebene, so viele Horizonte, die immer der gleiche Horizont waren, dass er sich selbst nicht mehr wirklich vorkam. (2005: 283)

Humboldt had dozed in so many coaches, had been pulled by so many horses, and had seen so many weed-infested plains that were always the same plain, so many horizons that were always the same horizon, that he no longer felt real even to himself. (2007: 243)

At the same time, Gauss ponders:

Der Tod würde kommen al seine Erkenntnis von Unwirklichkeit. Dann würde er begreifen, was Raum und Zeit waren, was die Natur einer Linie, was das Wesen der Zahl. Vielleicht auch, warum er sich immer wieder wie eine nicht ganz gelungene Erfindung vorkam, wie die Kpie eiens ungleich wirklicheren Menschen, von einem Schwachen Erfinder in ein seltsam zweitklassiges Universum gestellt. (2005: 282)

Death would come as a recognition of unreality. Then he would grasp what space and time were, the nature of a line, the essence of a number. Maybe he would also grasp why he always felt himself to be a not-quite-successful invention, the copy of someone much more real, placed by a feeble inventor in a curiously second-class universe. (2007: 242)

Unreality is the feeling gnawing at the heart of both Gauss and Humboldt. The theme of death and futility is introduced at the very start of the chapter, when Alexander von Humboldt doubts the usefulness of the channel in the Amazonian forest and 'an der Bedeutung der Flussreise selbst' (2005: 264): 'the significance of the journey upriver itself' (2007: 226).

Kehlmann's fantastic re-interpretation and deformation of these two great historical characters has to do directly with the issues mentioned above, history and reification. In an interview for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, dated 9 February 2006, he declared that he wanted to write like 'ein verrückt gewordener Historiker': a historian gone crazy (in Günther Nickel, 2009: 26-35),

thereby refashioning the relation between the exactness of facts and truth: ‘Im Dienste der Wahrheit musste ich eben hier und da die Richtigkeit manipulieren’: ‘in order to serve truthfulness I had to manipulate the factual details just here and there’, (interview appeared in *Der Spiegel* on 5 December 2005, in Günther Nickel, 2009: 36-46). Kehlmann’s use of indirect discourse throughout the novel has a distancing function:

Wieso wirken historische Romane trivial, aber wieso wirkt nicht trivial, was etwa Eric Hobsbawm [sic] schreibt? Es liegt daran, dass die erzählerische Distanz eine andere ist. Ein Fachhistoriker geht nicht zu nah dran an die Figuren, an das was er berichtet, und – und das ist der entscheidende Punkt – er würde nicht behaupten zu wissen, was wörtlich gesagt wurde. Er würde keine wörtliche Rede verwenden, es sei denn, er hat Dokumente und Briefe, aus denen er zitiert. Ansonsten würde er berichten, was inhaltlich ungefähr so geworden sein müsste, sein könnte. Er würde also die indirekte Rede verwenden. Und da dachte ich, das Experiment müsste eben darin liegen, ein Buch zu schreiben, das beginnt wie ein historisches Sachbuch, bis es dann plötzlich kippt, weil natürlich Dinge berichtet werden, die überhaupt nicht mehr sachbuchhaft, sondern romanhaft und frei erfunden sind. Es sollte so klingen, wie ein seriöser Historiker es schreiben würde, wenn er plötzlich verrückt geworden wäre. (in Günther Nickel, 2009: 32-3)

Why do historical novels seem banal, but what an Eric Hobsbawm [sic] writes does not? It depends on the fact that the narrative distance is different. A historian does not get too close to the characters, to what he reports about, and – this is the key factor – he would not claim to know the literal words of what had been said. He would not use any direct discourse, unless he had documents and letters to quote from. Otherwise, he would report the contents of what more or less must or could have been. So he would be using the indirect discourse. And so I thought, my experiment should consist in this: writing a book that begins like a historical textbook, till it suddenly tips over, because it obviously deals with things that are not in the least factual, but novelistic and freely invented. It should sound the way a serious historian would write, if he had suddenly gone crazy. (My translation<sup>187</sup>)

Indeed, Kehlmann’s reworking of the historical details of Humboldt and Gauss’ lives serve the purpose of a light and ironical *Zivilisationskritik*. Peter Heinz-Preusser has stated:

<sup>187</sup> Where no published English translation exists, I have provided my own. Dr Laura Martin kindly revised some of my translations.

Die Tragödie des Weltuntergangs kehrt als Komödie zurück. Genau darum, so war meine These, wird das Buch gekauft. Es handelt von der Konditionierung von Subjekten, die sich selbst, der Natur und den anderen um sie herum Gewalt antun, um sich als Ich zu erhalten. Das ist klassische Zivilisationskritik, die aber als Genussmittel verkauft wird. Man hat den Eindruck von Ernsthaftigkeit, ohne mit den drastischen Konsequenzen behelligt zu werden. Was früher ein Stoff für Apokalyptiker war, liest man nun amüsiert und gerade so, als hätte es mit ethischen Entscheidungen nicht das geringste zu tun. Kehlmann ist deshalb nicht schlicht trivial – den dann fände er mit seinem Gegenstand gar kein Publikum –, sondern anspruchsvoll, ohne das es bemerkt wird. Die letzte Welt, die er schildert, ist also nicht für Chiliasten, sondern für den Gourmet, der die gehobene Unterhaltung liebt.<sup>188</sup>

The tragedy of the end of the world comes back in the form of comedy. My thesis was: it is exactly for this reason that the book sells. It deals with the conditioning of subjects who exert violence towards themselves, nature and people around themselves in order to maintain a sense of self. This is classical critique of civilisation, but it is sold as a semi-luxury product. The reader receives the impression of seriousness, without being troubled by its drastic consequences. What was before a subject for apocalyptic writers, now can be read with amusement, and precisely in such a way as if it had nothing to do with ethical decisions. Therefore Kehlmann is not flatly banal – in that case, with his object, he would not find an audience – but, rather, demanding, without readers realising it. The last world, which he represents, is thus not meant for chiliasts, but rather for the gourmet who loves the fancy entertainment. (My translation)

The narrative foregrounds a characteristic blending of comedy, irony and melancholic moments, in its depiction of Humboldt's and Gauss' attempts at 'mathematizing nature'.<sup>189</sup> The critique of instrumental reason proceeds together with the emphasis on nature's resistance and on the uncanny character of the real. Magical elements, ritual moments and mythical motifs recur throughout the novel, not only as a tribute to Latin American Magical Realism, but also as a way of introducing the force of chaos—a theme dear to the author—underlying experience and reality.

Als ich began, meinen Roman über Gauss, Humboldt und die quantifizierende Erfassung der Welt zu schreiben, über Aufklärer und Seeungeheuer, über Grösse und Komik deutscher Kultur, wurde mir schnell klar, dass ich erfinden musste. Erzählen, das bedeutet, einen

<sup>188</sup> Peter Heinz-Preusser, 'Zur Typologie der Zivilisationskritik: Was aus Daniel Kehlmanns *Die Vermessung der Welt* einen Bestseller werden liess', in *Text + Kritik*, no. 177, 2008, pp. 76-7

<sup>189</sup> Sean Ireton, 'Lines and Crimes of Demarcation: Mathematizing Nature in Heidegger, Pynchon and Kehlmann', *Comparative Literature*, no. 63, vol. 2 (2011), pp. 143-60.

Bogen spannen, wo zunächst keiner ist, den Entwicklungen Struktur und Folgerichtigkeit gerade dort verleihen, wo die Wirklichkeit nichts davon bietet – nicht um der Welt den Anschein von Ordnung, sondern um ihrer Abbildung jene Klarheit zu geben, die die Darstellung von Unordnung erst möglich werden lässt. Gerade wenn man darüber schreiben werden will, dass der Kosmos chaotisch ist und sich der Vermessung verweigert, muss man die Form wichtig nehmen. Man muss arrangieren, muss Licht und Schatten setzen. Besonders die Darstellung meiner zweiten Hauptfigur, des wunderlichen Barons Alexander von Humboldt, jener Kreuzung aus Don Quixote und Hindenburg, verlangte nach Uebersteigerung, Verknappung und Zuspitzung. Hatte er in Wirklichkeit eine eher undramatische Rundreise von über sechs Jahren Dauer gemacht, so musste ich, um davon erzählen zu können, nicht nur sehr viel weglassen, sondern Verbindungen schaffen und aus isolierten Begebenheiten zusammenhängende Geschichten bauen.<sup>190</sup>

When I started to write my novel about Gauss, Humboldt and the quantifying conceptualisation of the world, about Enlightenment intellectuals and sea-monsters, about the greatness and comedy of German culture, it became immediately clear to me that I had to invent. To tell a story means to draw an arc where there is none to begin with, to give to narrative developments structure and a right sequence of actions exactly in those places reality does not offer any—not in order to give the world an orderly appearance, but to give its image that clarity that alone makes the representation of disorder possible. It is precisely when you want to write about the fact that the cosmos is chaotic and refuses to let itself be measured that you have to take form seriously. It is necessary to contrive, to set lights and shadows. The representation of my second hero, the bizarre Baron Alexander von Humboldt, that mixture of Don Quixote and Hindenburg, particularly required excess, stringency and pointedness. If in reality he travelled around the world for more than six years without any remarkable episode, then in order to be able to write a story about it, not only did I have to drop many details, but also make connections and build coherent narratives out of isolated events. (My translation)

### 7.9.1 Chaos, Story and Magic

*Mathesis universalis*, the endeavour of imposing a grid of measures on nature goes hand in hand with the new conception of a universal Man advanced by the Enlightenment.<sup>191</sup> Science on one hand, and Kant's philosophy on the other, which had made of space one of his *a priori* categories of the human mind, went in the direction of mathematizing the universe. In *Measuring the World*,

<sup>190</sup> Daniel Kehlmann, *Diese sehr ernsten Scherze, Poetikvorlesungen* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007), p. 36.

<sup>191</sup> Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: Capricorn, 1960), p. 173.

Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Friedrich Gauss represent exactly this drive toward measurement and quantification. However, for Gauss space is ‘curved’ and ‘very strange’, and he understands that in non-Euclidean geometry parallel lines do meet, as in the novel itself the parallel lives of the two scientists do. Kehmann himself describes Alexander von Humboldt as ‘jener Kreuzung aus Don Quixote und Hindenburg’ (‘Wo ist Carlos Montufar?’ in Gunther Nickel, 2009: 15): a hybrid of ‘Don Quixote and Hindenburg’, as his idealism and a controlling rigid attitude blend seamlessly in his fictional character. Alexander von Humboldt is depicted as denying everything supernatural out of intellectual belief, while Gauss from the start cannot exclude singular phenomena such as ghosts and telepathy. Neither character is a faithful portrayal of the two scientists, as Kehmann takes many liberties with the narrative. Both have in common their dislike of art and literature, whereby Gauss dismisses his son Eugen’s ‘Gedichte und dumme Zeug’ (2005: 222): ‘Poems and all kinds of nonsense’ (2007: 189), and reduces Goethe to ‘der Esel [...] der sich anmasse, Newtons Theorie des Lichts zu korregieren’ (2005: 158): the ‘ass who considered himself fit to correct Newton’s theory of light’ (2007: 134) and Humboldt says that ‘[i]hm selbst habe Literature ja nie viel gesagt. Bücher ohne Zahlen beunruhigten ihn. Im Theater habe er sich stets gelangweilt’ (2005: 221): ‘as for himself, literature had never meant that much to him. Books without numbers made him uneasy. And he’d always been bored in the theatre’ (2007: 188). Yet, during his exploration of the Amazonian region, Humboldt is continually obliged to negotiate his take on the world around him with the indigenous habit of telling stories, what he dubs ‘dieses ständige Herleiern erfundener Lebensläufe, in denen noch nicht einmal eine Lehre stecke[...]’ (2005: 114): ‘this eternal singsong recital of totally invented lives, which didn’t even have a moral in them [...]’ (2007: 95).

Story in the novel is conceived as the vehicle of a worldview which is completely other than the scientific measuring enterprise; story conveys the ungraspable and unyielding, incomprehensible aspects of nature and reality, those that cannot be caught in the net of measurements. Even Alexander von Humboldt’s adult devotion to science and exploration springs from stories of ‘existential Angst’, and particularly from that of ‘Aguirre the Mad’. This story is referred to more than once—first in Humboldt’s childhood, then during his exploration of the Orinoco river—and constitutes his ‘personal myth’, what propels him into exploration (2007: 15-6). However, after almost drowning in a

frozen lake as a boy, he becomes obsessed with science as a way of conquering the unfathomable forces of life and death.

In the novel there are various episodes which entail some form of magical belief or action; the Amazonian soothsayer staring at Humboldt's hand and finding 'nothing' is such a scene. Humboldt, as we saw in the preceding chapter, is said to have 'no past, no present, no future', thus he is 'nobody', he is caught in his own web of abstractions, which prevents him from being a fully fleshed individual. From the descent into the Cave of the Dead, to the appearance of a sea-monster, from a flying UFO to the dead birds' reflections in the Orinoco river, to the séance in Berlin, the novel displays a fine array of magical motifs, which have the function of foregrounding the boundaries of Humboldt's constricted views and attitudes and fostering a sense of humour in the reader, together with a certain suspicion or uneasiness about the apparent simplicity of facts and reality. Kehlmann blends themes of secular and supernatural magic, illusionism and a sense of haunted presence that, while making for an enjoyable read, also demands of the reader a certain amount of thought about ideas of science and civilization. 'So viel Zivilisation und so viel Grausamkeit, sagte Humboldt. Was für eien Paarung! Gleichsam der Gegensatz zu allem, wofür Deutschland stehe' (2005: 208): 'So much civilization and so much horror', comments Humboldt in front of the Aztec temple, 'What a combination! The exact opposite of everything that Germany stood for' (2007: 177), which, with the benefit of hindsight, can be read as an ironical comment on German twentieth century history.

Precisely the relation between civilization and violence toward nature and toward others is one of the leitmotifs of the narrative, violence which may be concrete or abstract, entailing physical action or intellectual grasping, passes through the quantitative framing and reduction of nature to mere matter. In contrast to this, the stories of metamorphosis that the natives tell each other during the navigation of the Orinoco river make space for the ever-changing and the mysterious in nature. While Humboldt holds on to drawing exact maps and measuring as a way of fixing data forever, metamorphic magical stories allow for that mystery that Humboldt refuses to face and acknowledge. On the other hand, Gauss's intellectual arrogance is shown not only in his treatment of his family, but also in the encounter with the Count von der Ohe zur Ohe, 'die einzige Person im Roman, die Gauss intellektuell überlegen ist': 'the only person

in the novel who is intellectually superior to Gauss', in the chapter 'Der Garten': 'The Garden'. (Kehlmann, 2007: 34). When the Count, who has read Gauss' work, offers to give away part of his land as a gift, Gauss mistakes his generosity for foolishness.

In a conversation with fellow writer Michael Lentz, reported in *Die Neue Rundschau* (vol. 118, 2007: pp. 33-47), Kehlmann declared:

Ganz wichtig finde ich, was Michael angesprochen hat: Die Frage, inwiefern eine andere Zeit in ihren Alltagsgebräuchlichkeiten überhaupt für uns noch nachvollziehbar ist. Ich glaube, die Fremdheit ist ungeheuer. Nur Leute, die sehr wenig reisen, meinen, dass die Welt überall ungefähr gleich ist, und nur Leute, die sich nicht mit Geschichte befassen, meinen, dass die Menschen im Wesentlichen immer gleich waren. Die Unterschiede zwischen den Zeitaltern sind gewaltig—im Verhalten, im Denken, in den emotionalen Prozessen. Das Merkwürdige ist, dass der Zugang zu historischem Material umso glaubhafter wirkt, je mehr man sich auf die Fremdheit konzentriert. Man kann eine Zeit am besten eingehen durch die Dinge in ihr, die für uns fast nicht mehr zu verstehen sind. Wenn man ein paar solcher Details der Fremdheit versammelt, ist eine fremde Epoche sofort erzählerisch beschworen. (37)

I find what Michael has addressed very important: the question of to what extent we can still understand another age in all its daily uses and customs. I believe that the sense of otherness is huge. Only people who travel little believe that the world is more or less the same everywhere, and only people who don't deal with history believe that human beings have always been essentially the same. The differences among the ages are tremendous—in behaviour, thought and emotional processes. It is remarkable that the access to historical material is all the more convincing the more you concentrate on the otherness. The best way to access an historical age is through those characteristics that we are almost no longer capable of understanding. If you gather some of these strange details, a foreign age can immediately be conjured up in a narrative. (My translation)

And also:

Ich glaube, dass meine Faszination für Humboldt viel zu tun hatte mit meiner Faszination für den südamerikanischen Roman, der eben auch die interessanteste experimentelle Strömung unserer Zeit ist. Für mich ist der südamerikanische Roman auch die Antwort auf die ästhetische 'Was-nun-Frage'. Zugleich hatte ich das Gefühl, ich kann das, was die tun, nicht nachmachen. Ich kann nicht einfach so Wunder in die Erzählung einfügen, das ist eine Kultur, der eben andere Möglichkeiten zur Verfügung stehen. Aber Humboldt war mein Schlüssel zu Südamerika. Humboldt war ein Weimarer Klassiker, der wirklich wie eine Art Gesandter, mit diesem Weltbild hinausging nach

Südamerika. Im Grunde steht er für das ästhetische Programm: 'Weimarer Klassik goes Makondo'. Also ja, es war wichtig, dass das ein Deutscher ist. Man muss zu einer Figur einen klaren emotionalen Zugang haben, und den hatte ich eben auch zu seiner sehr deutschen Steifheit. [...] (46)

I believe that my fascination with Humboldt had a lot to do with my fascination with the Latin American novel, which also is the most interesting experimental trend of our time. The South American novel is to me also the answer to the aesthetic question about 'what next'. At the same time I had the feeling that I can't imitate what they do. I can't simply put in miracles in the same way in the narrative, because it is a culture which draws on completely different possibilities. But Humboldt was my key to South America. Humboldt was a classical writer from Weimar, really a sort of envoy who travelled to South America with this worldview. Basically he stands for the aesthetic programme: 'Weimarer Klassik goes Macondo'. So, yes, it was important that he is a German. It is necessary to have a clear emotional access to a character, and that is exactly what I had to his very German rigidity. (My translation)

Indeed, in *Measuring the World*, the confrontation between the characteristics of German national character and civilization, and, on the other hand, Latin American mentality and wonder tales is the object of four fundamental episodes regarding Humboldt, depicted in the chapters 'Die Höhle', 'Der Fluss', 'Der Berg', 'Die Hauptstadt': 'The Cavern', 'The River', 'The Mountain', 'The Capital', respectively the fourth, sixth, eighth and tenth. This stark opposition between Weimar classicism and South American culture and atmosphere, and indeed between thought and belief, sustains the narrative tension of the whole novel. Humboldt translates Goethe's poem 'Wanderer's Nightsong' in the following prosaic way: 'Oberhalb aller Bergspitzen sei es still, in den Bäumen kein Wind zu fühlen, auch die Vögel seien ruhig, und bald werde man tot sein': 'Above all the mountain tops it was silent, there was no wind in the trees, even the birds were quiet, and soon death would come.' And with some irritation, to his fellows' remonstrations, he answers that 'Es sei natürlich keine Geschichte über Blut, Krieg und Verwandlungen, [...] Es komme keine Zauberei darin vor, niemand werde zu einer Pflanze, keiner könne fliegen oder esse einen anderen auf' (2005: 128): 'Of course it wasn't some story about blood, war, and shape-changing, [...]. There was no act of magic in it, nobody got turned into a plant or began to fly or ate somebody else' (2007: 197).



Kehlmann's treatment of Humboldt's character has been criticized by the admirers of the scientist for not being true to history.<sup>192</sup> But, given that the novel is an experiment with clashing or incompatible worldviews, its inventions are particularly to the point. The irony is not directed toward Humboldt or Gauss, but, through them, to our contemporary way of apprehending the historical past. As Stephanie Catani states:

Hier wird der Text von seiner eigenen Figur angegriffen—deutlicher lässt sich die Souveränität des Erzählers ironisch nicht unterlaufen. Das Lachen, das der Roman, auslöst und das Figuren und Erzählinstanz zugleich gilt, zielt keineswegs auf die historischen Figuren, sondern fungiert als Brücke zur Gegenwart, den 'Humor ist nie historisch, sondern stets gegenwartsunmittelbar'. Komik, so lautet die poetologische Botschaft des Textes, unterläuft die Historisierung literarischen Wissens und richtet ihre 'sehr ernststen Scherze', nach denen Kehlmann nicht zufällig seine Poetikvorlesungen benennt, an eine Gegenwart, der die im Roman aufgeworfenen Fragen nach der Relevanz einer Wissenschafts- und Aufklärungskritik und dem Umgang mit dem klassischen sowie nationalen Erbe noch einmal gestellt werden.<sup>193</sup>

Here the text is attacked by its own character—the narrator's sheer command could not sneak in anymore clearly and ironically. The smile brought about by the novel and concerning both the characters and the narrative style, is not directed by any means at the historical characters, but it has the function of a bridge to the present, as 'humour is never historical but always immediately in the present'. Comedy, according to the poetics of the text, undermines the historicizing of literary knowledge, and directs its 'very serious jokes', an expression which is, not coincidentally, the title of Kehlmann's lecture on poetics, at the present, to which the questions raised in the novel about the relevance of a critique of science and Enlightenment, the relation with the classics, as well as about national heritage are once more addressed. (My translation)

Irony, however, does not eliminate 'Spuk' (spookiness), which is an irreducible element encountered by the writer when he attempts to bring the historical past into the present, making it plausible and available for an altogether different sensibility and mentality, that of his own age. Thus, the novel plays with chaos and magic, the latter being a way of accommodating and acknowledging the reality of the former. But, behind the dazzling show of both chaos and magic,

<sup>192</sup> See, for example, Caroline Schaumann, 'Who Measures the World? Alexander von Humboldt's Chimborazo Climb in the Literary Imagination', in *The German Quarterly*, no.4, voll. 82 – 83 (Fall 2009), pp. 447-68.

<sup>193</sup> Stephanie Catani, 'Formen und Funktionen des Witzes, der Satire und der Ironie in *Die Vermessung der Welt*', in Gunther Nickel, 2009, p. 212

old age, decline and death advance and gain centre-stage. At the beginning of the 'Steppes' chapter, Humboldt says about death:

Was, meine Damen und Herren, ist der Tod? Im Grunde nicht erst das Verlöschen und die Sekunden des Übergangs, sondern schon das lange Nachlassen davor, jene sich über Jahre dehnende Erschlaffung; die Zeit, in der ein Mensch noch da ist und zugleich nicht mehr und in der er, ist auch seine Grösse lange dahin, noch vorgeben kann, es gäbe ihn. So umsichtig, meine Damen und Herren, hat die Natur unser Sterben eingerichtet! (2005: 263)

What, ladies and gentlemen, is death? Fundamentally it is not extinction and those seconds when life ends, but the slow decline that precedes it, that creeping debility that extends over years: the time in which a person is still there and yet not there, in which he can still imagine that although his prime is long since past, it lingers yet. So circumspectly, ladies and gentlemen, has nature organized our death! (2007: 225)

In his own turn, Gauss, after communicating at a distance with his assistant Weber through a device of his own invention, asks himself:

Wie viele Stunden hatte er vor dieser Empfangsanlage auf ein Zeichen von ihr gewartet? Wenn Johanna dort draussen war, genauso wie Weber, nur weiter entfernt und anderswo, warum nutzte sie dann nicht die Gelegenheit? Wenn Tote sich von Mädchen im Nachthemd heran-und zurückholen liessen, weshalb verschmähten sie diese erstklassige Vorrichtung? [...] Vielleicht sprachen die Toten ja nicht mehr, weil sie in einer stärkeren Wirklichkeit waren, weil ihnen diese hier schon wie ein Traum und eine Halbheit, wie ein längst gelöstes Rätsel erschien, auf dessen Verstrickungen sie sich noch einmal würden einlassen müssen, wollten sie sich darin bewegen und äussern. Manche versuchten es. Die Klügeren verzichteten. [...] (2005: 282)

How many hours had he waited in front of this receiver for a sign from her? If Johanna [Gauss' first wife] was out there, just like Weber, only further away and somewhere else, why didn't she use this opportunity? If the dead allowed themselves to be summoned and then packed off again by girls in nightdresses, why would they spurn this first clear device? [...] Perhaps the dead no longer spoke because they inhabited a more powerful reality, because all this around him already seemed like a dream and a mere half world, a riddle long since solved, but into whose tangle they would have to step again if they wanted to move and make themselves understood. Some tried. The more intelligent avoided it. [...] (2007: 242)

While old age and death are the concern of the second half of the novel, the last chapter depicts Gauss' son Eugen crossing the ocean in order to reach America

and, thus, the novel resists any ultimate closure: it hints at a totally new story, that of the young Eugen, to be played out in another setting, beyond the scope of the novel. The last word is 'America', signifying a continent and diverse cultures that have played a fundamental role in the novel, and a promise beyond the old European world.

## 8. Conclusion: Imagina[c]tion and De-Reification

This study has provided a multifaceted observation and analysis of the processes inherent in the reading of what I have called ‘hybrid fictions’. It has endeavoured to look at both the characteristics of three sample novels and of the reading process itself. Exploring concepts of magic and ritualization, I have made the case for the role of the reader’s active role and the subversive potential of such fictions, which criticise and expose the reification of ‘reality’ and of the imagination, through a stringent critique of the discourses of modernity, scientism, institutionalised religion and capitalism.

By looking at novels which defy neat labels, such as ‘magical realism’ or ‘fantastic’, this thesis advances a notion of hybrid fiction as blending fantasy and mimesis in a performative way, that goes beyond a merely mimetic idea of representation. Considering such narratives as magical supplements to the reader’s daily lives and consubstantial with them, and, on the other hand, introducing the concept of the ritualised role of the reader during the reading encounter entails a positive re-evaluation of the role of the reader’s imagination and emotions, and of the subversive potential of non-mimetic literature to act on the reader’s disposition. Thus, the fundamental role of literary imagination is advocated as capable of being not only entertainment, but also a world-making practice, whereby nature and culture, both inside and around the reader, are seen as co-extensive rather than in opposition. This is an ecological view of the (literary) imagination, because it considers creativity as relational and generated through the interaction of different discourses, agents, objects, practices, environments. Thus, literary reading is seen as imaginative action with an impact on the reader’s world, in more or less direct and subtle ways.

An ecological view of the imagination cannot but take into account Latour’s critique of modernity (1993), which has implications also for how we view creativity, nature and culture. In fact, only by recognizing the hybrid character of our ‘nature-culture’, and the proliferation of hybrids that it entails and represses at the same time, is it possible to rethink the role of literary fiction in an imaginative and de-reified way. This view, of course, is a political statement about the role of the Arts within academia and society at large, in a moment when they risk of being marginalised and diminished in their psychological, social and communal significance. Imagination, both the artist’s

and the reader's, is action, and can and does have an impact on how we view and shape our worlds, and the solutions we seek and come up with in our lives. Thus, literature becomes a 'field' in the physical sense of the world, interacting with many others, not a neat compartment set apart from 'reality' and strictly confined within institutional boundaries and policed by imaginary or actual guardians. This means, among other things, to give literature back to the people and re-inscribe its potential for change in our consciousness, both on an individual and collective level.

In order to start this practice, I have brought literary criticism and anthropology into dialogue, setting up a space for their interaction in what I have called 'anthropology of literature'. It is one path among many. It is a fruitful attempt in so far as it shifts old boundaries and pre-conceptions and allows us to reconceptualise and reconfigure the phenomenon we call literature in a way that encompasses issues which are relevant to our age, in literary criticism and beyond.

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